Making the Most of Madness in the Mad City

This one's for Erick.

Writing • **Benjamin Baugh**
Editing • **Ryan Macklin** • **Fred Hicks**
Layout and Original System Design • **Fred Hicks**
Art • **George Cotronis** • **Fred Hicks**

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A♣♠ A is for ANTS

2♣♠ B is for BREATH

3♣♠ C is for CABBIE

4♣♠ D is for DINO

5♣♠ E is for EAR

6♣♠ F is for FUCK

7♣♠ G is for GOBLINS

8♣♠ H is for HANDS

9♣♠ I is for INNARDS

10♣♠ J is for JUNGLE

J♣♠ K is for KNIFE

Q♣♠ L is for LANGUAGE

K♣♠ M is for MOUTHS

is for ANTS crawling under your skin.

See them burst out and creep back within!

I got clean enough to add up my life, and without the junkie math scrambling my brain, it totaled rehab. Calling in the last favor I had, I got me a bed at St. Vic's. After stripping in the intake room and taking the paper robe off, I felt pretty fucking virtuous flip-flopping down the beige hall to my room. But by the time I got there, the creepy crawlers had woken up and started nibbling and stretching under my skin.

Scratch scratch scratch

When I walked in, my roomie--a guy that looked like a jello mold made in a hot tub--was in watching TV. I wondered if he had marshmallows in him. Considering his size, he probably had at least a few in there.

Anyway, I had to ask. "Weed?"

Jello-guy shook as he chuckled. "Court ordered. Rehab for weed? Who ever heard of shit like that?"

"Anything good in the snack machine here?"

"Peanuts and shit. Not that I have any change." Thing is, the way he looked at me when I sat down, it was like one of those cartoons where the castaway cat sees the dog like he's a giant pork chop.

The ants kept me up, like they always do, so I didn't really mind it when Mister Jiggles started snoring later that night. I just sat up chewing mints, watching the lumberjack games on ESPN 89, and kept scratching, scratching, scratching. Not long after the fat guy started

snoring, I heard a sound like somebody dropping fifty pounds of raw liver. I looked over, and the fat guy had just opened up along his middle, unzipping throat to groin like a body-bag. His guts were climbing out, his stomach--a wet pink sack lifted on coils of intestine--came free with a wet pop. It dragged its colon across the fat man's bed sheet, leaving a trail of shit as it headed right towards me.

Thing about the ants is, stress--stress like seeing a man's guts coming at you that way--makes the itching so much worse. I dug my fingers in until I felt the skin inside my wrists and arms tear open, and god, oh god the relief from that itch as they all poured out and out, vicious and shiny, the color of my blood. They sniffed out fresh meat and gutrot, and I suddenly could smell it too. God, it was delicious. When they started eating the fat man's guts, the snowfall hush of a million little legs and jaws was drowned by a gurgling scream from the innards, wet and flatulent.

But by then I was running, and I'm so, so glad the ants can't show me what they see.

WHAT CAN I DO?

You're a living, breathing hive, an anthill. You really *do* have bugs under your skin.

If someone cut you in half, they'd see all the little tunnels and chambers like the ant-farm you had as a kid. When reality flinches back from you and you bleed, the ants come and swarm. Even outside your body, it's like they're part of you. You can taste what they taste, smell what they smell, feel what they feel. When you try and see what they see though, you're brain reels—the output from a million little compound eyes jacked through your visual cortex like a bad mushroom trip.

Bleed till your head swims and the room sways around you, and you'll cover every surface and everybody around you with your ants, soaking in all the sensory input. Or, if you're chugging a 64-ounce cup of Haterade™ for somebody, you can sic the little bastards on him and just sit back as they bite and chew, burrow and glut, gorge on meat and blood. When they crawl back under your skin, you feel like you just ate a big, satisfying meal.

A

A

(1-2 dice) Scratch your skin open and let trickle a few hundred ants out. That's enough to aggravate or hurt someone, taste and feel something the size of an armchair, or give you a jump on danger in your immediate surroundings

(3-4 dice) Rip and tear your skin open to pour the ants out. This is enough to cover up a tasteful living room set, gnaw a man to death in moments, or spread out and let you feel, smell, and taste everything in a whole house.

(5-6 dice) Slash yourself open suicide style and the ants burst out like arterial spray. Wholly devour a room full of helpless, screaming people to death. Spread out and lick the whole neighborhood. Cover a house, inside and out, with blood-colored ants with poison stings.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—Itch, bite, crawl, creep, wriggle, tickle... it's *driving you **fucking crazy***, and the only way to deal with the feeling of being *inhabited* is to beat the motherfucking shit out of something. Worse yet, if you keep your cool, the ants soak up the stifled rage, until you can't keep them inside anymore, and your sores burst open, you puke wriggly red gouts. Deny it however you like, but when they do horrible things to people, *you love it*.

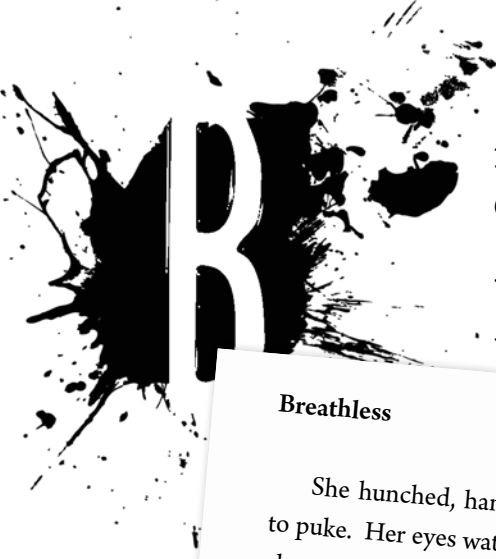
Flight—The ants are jerking at your skin, pulling you, trying to run off without you. It feels like your skin is going to rip open and run off without you, leaving you naked and dripping. Better keep up with it.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

The more madness you embrace, the more the crawling sensation stops being a mere sensation. Goosbumps rise on your skin, but don't go away—instead, they move around like a rat under a rug. When the madness takes root, the sores and wounds on your arms and legs stop closing up. They become little raw holes—ant holes.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

When you scratch and gouge yourself until you're nothing but a walking, meaty hive, becoming a vehicle for the ants tunneling through your flesh, driven by pain and self loathing until you crave nothing so much as spreading it around a bit. Something about you elicits confession—people unburden themselves of their foulest secrets and failings, and then you pick them apart. If you can't do this emotionally, then cover them in ants and do it physically. You've become an ***Agony Ant***.



R is for BREATH that curls like a hook.

Who will it chill, and who will it cook?

She hunched, hands clasped over her mouth like she was trying not to puke. Her eyes watered with the strain. She lurched for the bathroom, almost stumbling into the gents, but the guy coming out *what the fucked* at her, and she turned true into the ladies toilet.

Hiding his thoughts perfectly behind his mask of concern, the would-be rapist considered the dose he'd slipped into her drink. *Will it knock her out right here? Leave her puking in the toilet, too fouled by vomit to enjoy in my accustomed fashion?*

With false concern, he said to the door of the ladies' toilet, "Are you alright, baby? You need help?" Giving only the briefest second, as a show to anyone who might be watching, he followed up, "OK, I'm coming in."

She just finished heaving into the sink. When he walked in, she glared straight at him, stopping him cold. Even though she was swaying and nudged off balance by the drug's clumsy touch, that look in her eyes told him she was aware enough to know what he'd done.

"Ah," he said, the words barely escaping the back of his throat.

"Yeah," she bitterly spat back. Then she sharply inhaled, and he felt the air rush past him and into her.

He backed up, but was met by the door flinging open from the wind, knocking him onto the floor. She steadied herself on the sink, and each pant she let out was hot and wet, like the air from a dryer vent.

Scrambling, he fought to find his balance when she said, in a very breathy voice, "You stay there." A puff of hot breath drove him into the floor, hard enough to smash his nose on the tile. With each inhale, he was lifted up; with each exhale, he was slammed into the floor, cracking the tile underneath further and further.

As she walked out of the toilet, leaving him on the floor, she looked down and smiled. "Sorry, I just needed to catch my breath."

WHAT CAN I DO?

Everyone else is weak, needing millions of little breaths to live. You've got just one breath, but it's really, really big—big enough to sustain you forever, so long as you don't let it get away from you.

You can push it out of your lungs like a grand gale, blowing a mail truck through a shopping mall. Or you can let it out gently enough to tickle the neck of the boy you've been eyeing from across the bar. Open your mouth wide and huff, and it comes out searing hot, scorching skin angry red. Blow it through tight-pursed lips, and it's cold enough to freeze water in an instant.

If you hold all of it in, it'll keep you alive even with a plastic bag over your face for hours. But it so wants to be let out, to lick the outside air like a lizard's tongue as you breathe in and out.

(1-2 dice) Quickly exhale to knock someone down. Draw things towards you with an inhale. Lower or raise the temperature twenty or thirty degrees. Yell so loud you temporarily deafen people.

(3-4 dice) Blow out your breath and slam someone into a wall hard enough to shatter bone. Freeze water with a gentle blow, or boil it with a deep exhale.

(5-6 dice) Empty your lungs, and freeze a man solid or scorch him to death. Blow a truck through a building. Blow a house apart.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—You can't keep it in. It surges up your throat, forming words in your larynx against your will, bullying your mouth to spit them out. You bark angrily, blowing people's hair back. Let it all out like a hurricane, complete with arctic and desert winds. You're a force of nature, erosion on fast forward, and when your temper's up, everything around you gets worn down to a nub.

Flight—You're so scared, you can't breathe. It hides down in the bottom of your lungs, quivering like a kitten, and making your whole body shake along with it. You can't speak, because it won't rise out of your lungs. That means can't scream either, but you can run like hell. You've got so much breath, you could run forever.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

You're losing control of your breathing. You end up out of breath when you least expect it—gasping and choking as all but the thinnest threads of your single, huge breath surges out of you. You find your words louder, harsher as your breath pushes them our harder, fiercer.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

More and more your breath gets away from you, until one day it escapes completely. It wrenches itself lose from its roots deep in the base of your lungs. Tearing you inside out in a scream so loud it shatters concrete, it all ends in the gurgling slop of your innards erupting from your distended mouth until there's nothing left to void. Your breath feels tremendous sorrow at destroying what it once called home, and pours itself into your emptied skin, filling it like a balloon.

Bouncing and floating around, it tries to talk without vocal cords, boasting about how big it is when it wants to be in its weird, whistling voice—covering up for the inadequacies of its flesh-free body. Anybody who doesn't agree gets an earful, especially if it decides to emerge from your empty skin and prove just how big and powerful it really is. You've become a ***Blow Hard***.

C is for CABBIE whose car helps you flee.

Pay for the ride, but the chat is for free.

"So where ya headed?"

"I don't know! Just drive, alright?"

"Fine buddy, I'm driving. But I got to know where you're heading, so I can name the fare. Got to know what the fare is, don't you?"

"Whatever, I don't care! I just have to be away from her. Oh Jesus, drive faster!"

"Got to be careful driving faster around here, eh? The law takes a dim view of speeding in these parts."

"Oh fuck oh fuck, it's coming! Look, can't you see it? It's going to... oh fuck, come on drive faster!"

"Alright pal, fine look, I'm going faster. You're acting like you never saw nothing like that before."

"And you have?"

"You see all kinds of things. A dinosaur is about the tamest thing I seen this week. Now, that we're moving to your satisfaction, how about you tell me where we're going."

"Take me home. No, wait! Take me to my Mom's house."

"That's a bit of a drive..."

"Whatever. I'll pay."

"Fare'll be that photo you have of your daughter. The one down in the credit card pocket in your wallet."

"I don't... hey, I do have... how did you...?"

"That's the fare—either pay up, or get out."

"Alright. Here."

"Give it a kiss before passing it up, would you? Yes, just a little peck like that. That'll more than cover it, and thank you sir."

"Yeah, whatever."

"So, you see the Cubs game the other day? Bunch of bums!"

WHAT CAN I DO?

Wave your hand & whistle and there's always a cab for you. Usually it's a car, unless you're somewhere weird—but being somewhere weird is pretty easy if you have the right fare. Sometimes it's a beat up New York cab. Sometimes, it's a rickshaw. Sometimes, it's a palanquin with chatty bearers.

Not all fares are equal, and you might have to shout to get attention. Calling a cab in a busy street to take it somewhere nearby won't cost much and doesn't take more than a whistle. Calling a cab to crash through the wall of a building you're in will cost you more, and you might have to scream loud. Calling one to drive you down into the river and drop you off at the Atlantean consulate will require you pony up something truly precious for the fare, and be prepared to bellow like a foghorn for it.

Regardless of the form it takes or where it drives you, the cab is always driven by a vaguely familiar guy who chatters away about the local area, a sports team you may or may not have heard about, or politics which occasionally turn out to be current.

(1-2 dice) Call a cab on a street where you'd expect to find one. It can take you anywhere else cabs regularly run, even if in a different city. You'll take lots of turns and twists, but the ride won't run longer than half an hour even if the traffic is lousy. Don't worry kid, the fare won't be anything you'll miss. The cabbie is friendly enough, and full of local info and trivia. Ask him where to get a good meal in whatever city you end up in, or ask him the best place to score a .45 longslide with laser sight if you're feeling like gunning for Mizz Connor.

(3-4 dice) Call a cab from anywhere—on top of a building, in a sewer, in the middle of the desert. It can take you anywhere you can name and give directions for. On these trips, the cabbie has some insights—sometimes, into things you don't want to know. He's always pally, but his gadfly questions make you consider things you might prefer to ignore. The fare will certainly be something you'll remember paying.

(5-6 dice) Call a cab from anywhere, doing as much or as little damage as you like. It'll happily take you anywhere you can picture in your mind, even if the traffic on the 666 connector through downtown Tartarus is gridlocked. The cabbie will chatter away about this and that, casually dropping some dread secret or hideous truth in an off-hand way. The fare will hurt though—it'll cost you something that you won't want to give up.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—"Follow that girl! Run every red light! Take the sidewalks if you must!" The Cabbie will turn the cab around and do the chasing if you wave the right fare under his nose. Around town, some cash will do it. If you're chasing somebody through weirder places—the inside of an autistic girl's projected psychoscape, or running down hopping vampires on Kowloon's nighttime streets—you'll need to throw memories or keepsakes across the seat. In the adrenalized grips of your anger, *you just don't care*. Any fare seems worth it—until it's too late to take it back, when your calm lucidity pairs with horror at what you've done.

Flight—"Cabbie! Drive! Fast!" The cab is the ultimate getaway car. There's no telling where you'll end up though.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

More and more, you feel the need to be somewhere else. The sense of urgency—that you've got somewhere to be and need to get there quick—builds in you. It makes staying in one place for long uncomfortable, and you catch yourself picking up your phone or raising your hand to call the Cab. Of course, it gets easier and easier to find. After a while, all you have to do is *think* about signaling for one. Sometimes, just far enough away that it *might* be a coincidence or illusion, you see a big yellow cab slowly following you, just waiting for you to waggle a finger and call it over.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

Eventually, your need to be anywhere else gets so bad you scream "Go! Just go!" But when you get to your destination, you don't have the fare to cover the ride. With everything else spent—that is, except *you*—the cabbie shakes his head, locks the doors, and drives you back to Dispatch.

Once there, you're chained to the seat of your very own Cab. They tell you one thing: "Keep 'em talking." You pick people up—especially the Awake—the doors clunk closed, and the uncomfortable backseat becomes positively *torturous*. You ask questions, drive about, and drop the lumps of twitching meat off somewhere. You are a ***Taxi Cab Confessor***.

is for DINO with teeth long as knives.

He'll swallow you down when he finally arrives.

I was too young when I saw JURASSIC PARK, but my parents took me anyway. For weeks afterwards, I'd start crying every time I saw ripples in water, because I thought the big T-Rex was coming to get me, stomping around and making the water shake. That's around when the dinosaur came to live in the back of my brain, in my closet, always over my shoulder or just out of sight.

Mom would say, "Darling, look at how small your closet is. How could a big mean dinosaur fit in there?"

But Mom's logic couldn't wish him away. He managed to find his way in there every night, his huge amber eye peeking out from the half-open door.

When he'd snort, his breath would blow the door open all the way, and I'd scream myself awake.

For years, he went away. Sleep came back, like a cool,

dark hand laid across my forehead. But when I stopped sleeping, he came back. He was bigger and braver than before. Now when he comes lumbering closer and closer, I'm not the only one who can hear him.

He puts fear into people. I know that if I can play it cool and keep the terror off my face, they'll think it's ME they're shitting themselves over. At least, until he bites through the roof, and he's right there with those ropey strands of drool coiling about me.

Even with his wet breath on my back, I somehow get past the fear of him somehow and into an entirely different state. I'm perfected by it, and I welcome what comes next.

WHAT CAN I DO?

You always know where the dinosaur is—and you can bring him closer, if you can handle playing bait.

The dinosaur isn't in your head anymore. He's escaped from the cage you built around him. When things get bad, you can tell he's coming for you by the way your coffee ripples, by the faint throbbing vibrations in the floor. When he gets closer, you can hear his tread clearly, hear the damage left in his wake. When he's right behind you, his breath is a hot wet wind on the back of your neck.

You aren't the only one who can sense his approach anymore. People around you pick up on it, getting afraid and panicky, grow uneasy without knowing why. When he actually shows up, then they react exactly like you'd expect them to react to a giant fucking carnivorous dinosaur. Inevitably, he does just what you fear most, what deep in your bowels and bones you've been terrified of since childhood. His mouth opens wide as he bites you, ripping your flesh, crushing your bones, swallowing you down.

Then the primal fear is gone, replaced by a primal sense of power. You realize with grim, reptilian humor that now you are the dinosaur, and the whole world looks so, so tasty.

(1-2 dice) You hear the dinosaur coming, getting closer, and everyone else feels it too. People are uneasy; some are compelled to leave.

(3-4 dice) The dinosaur is right behind you. If you keep your cool, everyone will run or cower in fear.

(5-6 dice) You *are* the dinosaur—45 feet long, ten tons, jaws like a car crusher, senses of a hunting bird. The people cowering are meat. The people running are moving meat. Recent evidence suggests T-Rex had proteins and tissues a lot like a modern bird, so he might taste like chicken. All you know is, then you are the T-Rex, it's people that taste like chicken.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

HERE

Fight—You remember what it is like to be the T-Rex—the power, the utter confidence, the capacity for absolute satisfaction when you just divide the world into two broad categories—things to eat and things to fuck. You remember in your bones how positively *infuriating* the lack of the second is, and nothing but over-indulgence of the first will make it all right again.

Flight—With the dinosaur already making you want to run and scream, all it takes is a little nudge to set you off. Even inside the dinosaur's skin, sometimes the big beast gets spooked by all the strangeness it doesn't understand—fire, machinery, the tax code—and his flight is just as devastating as his fury.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

HE

When Madness starts to devour your reality, the dinosaur becomes a constant presence that everyone can sense, like an ever-growing shadow. Eventually, you can't make him go away anymore. He's always lurking somewhere, peeking in the restaurant windows while you're on a date, or digging up the back yard of your parent's house in frustration. Sometimes, he's back in the closet again, waiting for you to reach for a shirt.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

COMES

When the dinosaur eats you down for the last time, he roars its satisfaction. But that feeling doesn't last long. You're in him now, in his head. He remembers being you, and he hates the feeling of your spindly squishy body, your squeaky voice, and your dead senses. Worse, without you to stalk and torment, he loses his purpose, so he wanders

you'll
BE
sorry

off to make a nuisance of himself in the Mad City. Sooner or later, something takes a fancy to him, seeing a scrappy, lovable mutt instead of a giant, fanged, killing machine from the elder epochs of deep time. Eager for company, the dinosaur responds well to any kind treatment, and will eventually wear a collar with his name on it, beg for treats, and play fetch. Of course, what he begs for are living people, what he fetches are errant interlopers among the Awake, and the name on his collar is ***REX***.

is for EAR stealing
secrets from air.

Shut up and listen,
what is it you hear?

ARE you going crazy? oh . . . YOU WISH!

I read in a book that sometimes audio hallucinations are really just you mumbling to yourself unconsciously, and if you hold your mouth open, the voices will stop because you can't mumble with your mouth wide open.

You read now? imagine that.

that's RETARDED.

That doesn't work for me.

(they are coming for you again)

that man over there wants to KILL you he wants to RAPE you he wants to EAT you

I tried it, and the only thing that happened other than getting STARED AT was I caught a fly in my mouth.

it tasted good

like the rain

or PISS (lick it up, jerk)

it IS one voice

it ISN'T one voice

or it IS which IS it

I just wish it were one voice, because
I can't keep them all straight.

of course not, you fucking idiot

you never could

Some of them I recognize,

NOT ME

like my Mom,

never loved you

you don't know me not yet

or my older brother,

still here, skidmark?

oh god it's you again

have a nice day

oh god it's you again
is he looking at my tits?

sure, keep the change, you
don't need it, you don't–

that'll be two fifty

or that girl that sells me
coffee every morning.

if you ask me out i'll laugh at you, but i will tell you when someone wants to hurt you

it's time to WAKE UP
and smell the desperation

mister same thing every day

keep the change

oh god it's you again

Even my old drunk chemistry
teacher from 7th grade.

today's lesson is napalm.
easy as pie, just like diesel-
fertilizer bombs. hey, who
wants to cook up some meth?

huff huff huff huff huff huff
HUFF huff huff huff huff huff
huff HUFF HUFF
huff HUFF
HUFF

Some of them . . .

I don't think are even people. HUFF

I SMELL yoooou

Sometimes they argue
and fight and sometimes
one makes another cry.

sort of?

I look sort of crazy, listening
to them, but the thing is,
sometimes what they say is true.

that man he's coming closer and he really DOES want to EAT you.

So when they say to, I run.

RUN, YOU FUCKING MORON! RUN!

WHAT CAN I DO?

You hear voices, lots and lots of voices. Some offer advice, some curse, some scream abuse, some just weep, some gab away in strange languages. You don't really know what they are or where they come from. Are they the dead? Echoes from the past or the future? Hallucinations? Your mind trying to make sense of telepathic signals? Sometimes it feels like all of these could be true.

The thing about it is, sometimes (often, even) the voices turn out to be true. The combination to a locker, the phone number of a hot girl, and when to duck just before the bullet drills your cortex. Some of the voices are bilingual and translate for you, when they're feeling generous. Others are fonts of useful trivia.

The catch is, you have to talk to them out loud—no matter how loud you think something, they can't hear it unless you say it.

(1-2 dice) Get a modest, immediate advantage. Learn something you once knew but have forgotten, or that should be obvious to you. Sense a quick warning of immediate danger, or recall where you have a few bucks stashed in your apartment.

(3-4 dice) Gain some kind of new knowledge or insight, something isn't totally weird and esoteric. Learn a private phone number, a person's actual weight, or the baseball stats for the 1988 Yankees regular season. Get a chorus of voices guiding you to safety in a disaster. Let the voices guide your own and speak somebody's most shameful secret.

(5-6 dice) Listen to the voices speak of hideous and impossible things. Discover the burial place of dead gods, the phone number of Satan, or incantations which cause ghosts to burn like fuel air explosives. They can tell you when the Stars Are Right, and they can guide your hands or movements to see you safe through almost any disaster, or they can lead you to cause a disaster of your own.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—They scream, taunt, insult your manhood, and beg for vengeance, they pile abuse on those who piss you off and they build you up. More than anything, they won't *shut the FUCK UP!* When you start beating somebody's face in with a length of rebar, they'll be cheering you on the whole time.

Flight—They gasp, cry, beg, howl, and sob. They chew your nerves up and spit them out until every sound and every light melds into a crashing, eviscerating menace. The only way to be safe is to run as fast as they're screaming for you to run. If you're lucky, maybe you'll even outrun the voices for a short time.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

You start to lose the ability to tell which voices are in your head and which are outside. You'll be talking to somebody, having a three-way conversation with one of the voices and never even realize—until the real person starts to stare—that they can't hear the other part of the conversation.

You go from looking crazy to feeling crazy. No matter how often the voices come through for you, there's the inevitable sense that you *must* be going crazy. One day, those voices won't just be on the inside anymore. *Oh, how you wish they still were.*

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

Eventually, you can't tell your own thoughts from all the voices you hear, and that's when you're lost. The voices greedily grab control over your flesh, opening their own mouths on your head to speak from, so they can be heard by everyone. Your head becomes a mass of hair and mouths—jabbering, weeping, speaking hideous blasphemies. You sound like a mob having an argument about a hundred different subjects. You want to find people who will appreciate what you have to say and *make them listen to you*. When they've become drooling shells, you can take their mouth and add it to your head, making their voice one of yours. You've become a ***Talking Head***.

F is for FUCK!

(A rude thing to yell.)

So useful to say; satisfying as Hell!

I got to clean up my language. I caught myself cursing around my Mom the other day, and that's not fucking -- sorry! -- that's not right. My mouth keeps getting me into trouble.

When I drop the F-Bomb now, it really explodes. You know how everything you say is better with "fuck"? "Fucking hot" is hotter than hot. "Fucking cool" is cooler than cool. For me, it's *true*. Shit, it's *fucking true*.

If I scream about beating the fuck out of somebody, then I'm going to beat them down hard. If I drive a fucking fast car, then I'm laying down rubber and roaring. And if I proclaim my cock to be "fucking huge" then I'd better not be wearing tight jeans.

I was just blowing smoke with my friends the other night when I said I'd "Fuck the *fucking shit* out of that hot-ass chicklet."

Worst. Sex. Ever.

WHAT CAN I DO?

"Fuck" is the universal intensifier. When you say "fuck" then it makes things more intense in a very literal way.

Everything is more extreme and emphatic with it. "It's fucking cold in here" means it's really really cold. "That's a big fucking gun!" means that the firearm in question is exceedingly large.

If you said, "These jeans make my ass look fucking hot," then expect to have it started at, slapped, and quite possibly asked out on a date (don't worry, the rest of you gets to join in). Then again, your ass could also *explode into flame*—so be careful with your phrasing.

Add "fuck" to an exclamation or an observation, and make the thing you're talking about more so—hotter, colder, finer, bigger, uglier, faster. The intensity doesn't last long, unless you keep up a litany of fuckword after fuckword. There has to be something already there to magnify, though, before you start laying out the "fuck". Fuck makes it extreme, but it doesn't create. It just isn't a very original word.

(1-2 dice) Magnify something tangible, within the realm of possibilities. A "fast as fuck" car could outrun just about any other car, but not a jet plane. In a fight you could "beat the fuck" out of any ordinary person, but couldn't punch out a rhino.

(3-4 dice) Intensify the fuck out of anything. If it's "hot as fuck," things will start to spontaneously catch on fire. Tell someone "you fucking want me", and they'll go to bed with you (even though you'd be a *fucking shitbag* for using supernatural whammy to get laid).

(5-6 dice) Fuck limitations. A dog that's "fucking enormous!" will be big enough to give King Kong a chomp, and a "big fucking gun" can shoot down the fucking space shuttle.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—"*I'm going to kick the fuck out of that fucking fuckwad motherfucker so hard his grandma will shit a fuck.*" It feels fucking good to fucking unload, no restraint at all. Every "fuck" makes you fucking angrier.

Flight—"*Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck run like fucking fuck!*" When the fear grabs your balls and yanks them back up into your abdomen, the fucks fly out on their own, pushing your feet faster and faster.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

It's just like Mom used to say—one of these day's you'll say that in front of somebody and it'll really embarrass you. Your language just gets fouler, baser, simpler. With 'fuck' there to magnify and enhance, you just start using it for every little thing. "Pass the fucking Fruity Pebbles" or "that's a fucking cute kitten!" It gets to the point where

you lace everything you say with "fuck" so much, that you couldn't keep it clean if your life depended on it. Not to mention that doing so means everything in your life becomes *that much more intense*.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

One day, you say, "I sure say 'fuck' a whole fucking lot" and then it's all she wrote.

You're no longer able to think in terms less obscene than "Fucking fuckclowns fucking up my fucking city." *Everything* gets jacked up. It's so hard to fucking think, the thoughts race around your skill like ferrets on meth, and so there's nothing for it but to act. And to act loud and extreme. You take everything too far—too *fucking* far. There isn't anything that doesn't set you off into a torrent of obscenity and violence. You've become a ***Fuckwit***.

G is for GOBLINS who lurk and who sing... eager and waiting for each awful thing.

MEMO

Mr. Dillon sauntered into my cubicle, the condescension so thick I could read it in his walk before he started talking. "You know these server stats reports are important, right?"

Any second now his eyes were going to follow mine as they wandered up to the drop ceiling right above him, and he'd see *them*, poking out from a small crack.

But he didn't; he just kept yammering on. "I have to present the usage overview at the GRI steering committee meeting on Friday. I don't have to tell you what that means, do I?"

The panel in the ceiling was shoved open further, and the big paper cutter from the copy room slid out partway. How they hell did they get it up there? They must have carried it all the way and set it up, just waiting for Mr. Dillon to come over so they could dangle it over his head.

"As part of our quarterly expense justification TRI reporting cycle..."

I've never been so thankful that Mr. Dillon is so far up his own ass. One of them was waving, trying to catch my eye. It took a claw off the cutter and the blade scythed open. Shit! It passed just an inch from his head. How could he not feel that?

"... so our projected usages matches our actual usages within the budgetary variance cone."

I saw them mouthing to each other, their little fanged maws forming silently around "projected usages" and "budgetary variance." They all stared at me now, raising their little eyebrows with the

unspoken question. "Drop it? Yeah?"

"Because if we don't have the server stats for the farm and the TROS reports, then our usages figures will be inaccurate, and nobody wants inaccurate usages figures. Right?"

He wants me to agree with him just so I know who's the boss of me. He knows I'll do his stupid reports, but he has to waddle over here and get his filthy management all over my cubicle.

Up above, they're gesturing at me, trying to get me to just give them a nod. And I suddenly realize I'm about to say yes to the wrong person. What would seeing a guy get brained unconscious be worth? At least a couple of days off? Maybe I could get a long weekend out of it.

I make eye contact with Mr. Dillon and smile. "Yes." But I'm not talking to him.

WHAT CAN I DO?

The goblins have decided that you are their best friend. Which as you might guess, ain't all it's cracked up to be.

All around you—in drawers, down sewers, under the seat in the car, anywhere something little could hide—there are goblins. They're all about the size of a rat, but they come in all shapes and colors, sometimes even with recognizable faces. They're evil, spiteful and cruel, but where you're concerned, they're so indulgent and helpful to the extreme. It's like they read the hidden desires in your heart, and try to make them happen for you. Where do they come from? Where do they get all their nasty toys? What won't they do to get you what you want? No idea, but it means you have to be really careful talking to women in bars—and that goes double with people who piss you off.

With a thought, your goblins spring to service, doing everything a horde of little creatures can manage for you—which admittedly, isn't always a lot. Be careful. They're often very literal, so you have to give them pretty clear instructions. If you tell them, "Look around and see if you can find any lost cash" they'll raid wallets and purses and safes—all on the idea that if nobody is actually looking at it, then nobody *really knows* it's there—that's the same as "lost", right? If you ever decide you really, truly don't like somebody… well, they're not pretty little pixies. There are few things

goblins likes more than really letting somebody know how much they're disliked.

(1-2 dice) A few discrete goblins give you a little advantage or work a little mischief. Tying an attacker's bootlaces together or pulling the trigger on somebody's holstered gun. They're aces at finding secret nooks.

(3-4 dice) Hundreds of goblins come calling, and they can do a shitload of work or seriously mess a guy up—maybe even kill, if he doesn't run like hell. They're quick, tough, and stronger than something four inches tall has any right being, so there's just no easy way to fight them.

(5-6 dice) Thousands of goblins come crawling out of the woodwork to work some chaotic miracle—destruction and total mayhem guaranteed, unless you can word it *just right*. Anybody facing the wrath of this many little bastards is in the sort of trouble they don't tend to live through. In a mob, the goblins are very, very cruel, and usually just as hungry.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—They make it so easy to unleash your wrath. Just speak three little words: "Have fun, boys." Your little friends know you so well, don't they? Sometimes better than you know yourself, it seems. They know just what you want to see done to the people who piss you off, and they're only happy to do it—hell, they're your id made flesh, unchained and on a rampage. Mister Hyde's got *nothing* on these wee motherfuckers—or so he learned from you last week.

Flight—Sometimes, seeing how eager the little monsters are to do horrible things for you is enough to make you run. You're running from your own creatures, to get some distance between yourself and the slaughterfest you can call up at will. Other times, a legion of tiny screams warns of something bad coming. Trust them, and run like hell… even if sometimes they get you running just for a laugh.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

At first, the goblins came and did things only when you called them. But more and more, they're just showing up on their own.

You see them sneaking around, just out of everyone else's sight. You hear their whispers when you're trying to sleep. And they're trying to be helpful—they're even starting to help out when you'd really prefer them not to.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

The goblins are going to figure it out eventually. They want to help you so badly, but you keep doing things that are bad for you. They always want to be there for you, every minute of your life. They want to make sure your every choice is the right one, so they'll quit listening when you tell them to go away. When you sleep, they'll tie you down—you know, to keep you from hurting yourself, and set to work on you. They'll mine little tunnels in you—around and around, between your organs, inside unused portions of your brain—turning you into a meaty Habitrail. Once their work is done, they'll move in. When you wake up, your body won't be under your control anymore. You won't be able to even blink on your own—the goblin running your eyes will have to it for you. And they certainly won't let you scream. Oh, how you'll want to, because you'll certainly feel them and their never-ending crawling around. You won't really a person anymore—you'll be meat-vehicle, like an airliner for goblins. You'll be a ***Gobliner***.

H is for HANDS so clever and wise.

Pick up an old tool to get a surprise!

WHAT CAN I DO?

Tools remember the hands that have used them, and your hands know how to talk to them. Lay your hands on an object, and it reveals truths and secrets. If you listen hard, you'll learn how to use whatever you hold as though as you're borrowing the greatest set of hands that've ever touched it. You can drive a race car as well as the professional driver who drove it before you. You can shoot a pistol as well as the Federal agent you took it from. With a hacker's keyboard, you can crack an NSA mainframe.

I had to get the bullet out of him and stitch him up soon, or Eric was a goner. His skin looked bad, ashen and pale. There was probably more of his blood on me than in him. Thankfully I had Burke's old lock picks on me, so the service entrance opened under my hand.

"Ashen" is the word you hear a lot, and it's perfect. His skin looked like potash, pale grey, and spent. Helping him stumble into the supply closet, I groped around... nothing! Everything was new and sterilized, untouched by human hands. All the catheter and IV kits were in their plastic wrappers. I stuffed a wad of gauze under his coat. "Hang on, bro. I'll be right back."

I legged it to the surgery that I saw getting out. The orderly wheeled the patient away as the surgeons strutted out. The nurses started to tidy, and I had just enough time to dash in, roll the whole tray of blooded instruments into my backpack, and dash out before they saw me. Back in the supply closet, I dumped out the instruments, the used IV tube and the bags of O-neg I snagged earlier.

"Alright bro, I got what I need here." I grabbed the scalpel and concentrated, listening for its voice in my head. "It'll talk us through this. Hang on."

Objects will sometimes treat you to unexpected visions and truths. You might grab a knife to cut up some apples, and suddenly be bombarded with flash of blood and wrath. With the sound of steel vibrating in your ears, in sympathy with a human scream you feel, the skills of a murderer filling your mind. You're left wondering, who did this blade kill?

(1-2 dice) Gain flashes of insight and inspiration from an object. Your hands still move mostly at your own volition, which might not always help if you need to do delicate or precise work that you're completely clueless about, but wrap your mitts in a heavyweight's used hand tape, and you can deliver the pain fast and hard.

(3-4 dice) Your hands take on a life of their own, leaving you sometimes astounded at the feats they accomplish. Prepare a gourmet meal in a chef's kitchen or fly a helicopter.

(5-6 dice) The ingenuity you can extract from objects is perfected, and is no longer dependent on your body or mind's ability to keep up. Use your magic hands to tie on a pair of running shoes worn by a world-class sprinter, and you can sprint as fast. Hold a book, and know its contents as well as the smartest person to read it.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—Flashes of anger make you squeeze tighter, making you rough and unsteady with the thing in your hands. The fury of a past owner scrapes across your palm and makes your hands move with rage. There isn't an object that can't be used to hurt someone.

Flight—Your hands tremble, or perhaps the object is shaking in your grasp, but for a moment you can't tell if it's your fear or a previous wielder's that you've feeling. Before you know what you're doing, you're running.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

You catch yourself dragging your fingers along a desk or a chair, just to feel the memories soaked in like finishing oil. You steal objects from loved ones because you want to know how they held them. More and more, you have trouble telling the difference between you and the people who've touched things before you. Eventually, letting go of something feels like you're letting go of a part of yourself.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

Eventually it's undeniable—the insight from objects is unreal and invasive, but also addictive and perversely thrilling. It's like the porno of the soul, reading hints of someone else's true nature. The hands make us human and let us work our will upon the world. So if there was a seat to the human soul, it would have to be in the hand.

You stop coveting the castoff tools the masterful and inspired have touched, and instead seek the hands themselves. Your own useless paws shrivel and shrink. Take the hands of a surgeon off at the wrist and they adhere to your stumps, as would the hands of a marksman, a kung-fu expert, a painter, or—well, just about *anyone* really. The hands of the Awake are especially prized, because they let you work bizarre wonders. Always working, never satisfied, you've become the ***Handyman***.

is for INNARDS,
all coiled up inside.

Keep them filled up,
or out they will slide.

YESTERDAY

- half a pound of bacon
- seven eggs
- a blueberry muffin
- nine chicken fingers (with honey mustard sauce)
- twelve hot wings
- three refills of my big-chug orange soda
- half a chicken
- half a German chocolate cake
- a handful of nuts and bolts

I keep a food diary, because my insurance won't pay for the stomach staple unless I prove it's glandular

- My Programming Perl textbook
- 3 gallons of premium gasoline
- the remote control to My DVD player
- seven feet of carpet from the floor of my bedroom
- a down pillow
- an old hard drive

DEAR DIARY

When the man with vines for hair and banana slugs for lips came in through my window, I was waiting. I doused him with napalm jelly I'd pissed into my big-chug cup, and then him with the taser I'd shat out earlier, in one great, grunting burst. As the napalm lit off, his eyes widened and he let out the most ungodly scream. He was standing in a pool of fire-retardant gel I'd puked all over the floor and the walls before he came in. After he was done burning, all that was left was a rancid stink like the dumpster outside a farmer's market and so much greasy char on the walls that I knew my security deposit was fucking gone. While it all cooled, I tore the last page off my diary—the one with all the weird shit—and slowly ate it while my guts rumbled for more.

WHAT CAN I DO?

Other than be pretty goddamn gross? Well, your guts are an alchemist's phantasmagoria. Your stomach is a sanctified crucible, your colon an *athanor*.

For starters, you can live on *anything* small enough to swallow, and nothing you eat will ever harm you. You could survive quite happily on radioactive cyanide and molten magma macaroons.

The subtle fire burns in your belly does so much more than merely protect you from what you eat (but you'll still want to some antacids on hand). You can shove anything down your gullet, and you'll excrete something new and wonderful—giving new meaning to the expression "shit a brick." Eat lead and poo gold. Eat some old Tandy computers and crap a missile guidance system. Drink grape soda and piss *Crystale*.

The relationship between what goes in and what comes out isn't literal, but rather symbolic. If you want to squeeze out a brand new iPhone (a good choice too—nice, rounded, *comfortable* design), then chomping down your old Nokia and an iPod might work for you, as might half a dozen issues of *Macworld* magazine.

There's a logic to it a hungry brain can recognize.

(1-2 dice) Make things from simple combinations, based on the material components. Guzzle down some fertilizer and gasoline, then crap plastic explosives.

(3-4 dice) Make a highly tenuous transformation with only a symbolic link between what you eat and what you crap. Eat fifty Atomic Fireball candies and shit out fifty ounces of weapons-grade plutonium.

(5-6 dice) Crap things which can't possibly exist or that shouldn't fit through your rectum—rayguns, campaign posters for JFK's second term, undead gerbils, food pills, rocket boots, tricorders, homunculi, holy grails, healing potions, cyborg arms, and vegan cheese that tastes and melts like real mozzarella (though given where it came from, who—besides *you*—is going to eat such miraculous *ass-cheese*, vegan or otherwise?)…

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—For you, with this kind of Talent, your Fight response isn't about wrath—it's about *gluttony*. Rapacious, eat-anything hunger looks weird and alien on an amoeba, but on a person—you—it's outright terrifying. The rest of the world is your lunchbox, and when it looks at you, it can *see that*. And people will run scared of the guy who can make bullets by eating their fingers.

Flight—Fear and instinct snarl up in your belly, and you have to clench your cheeks to keep from shitting a pantsfull of chainmail or a fire extinguisher in panicky response to terrifying circumstances. It's easy to run like hell if you're running for a bathroom. You ever hear about those poor villagers in Vietnam, the ones who soiled themselves whenever they heard a loud noise after all the bombings? Well, what do you think would happen if they uncontrollably crapped A-bombs and pink elephants in a moment of phantasmagoric terror?

HOW DO I CHANGE?

It starts so slow, you don't even notice at first. You're sitting around watching TV while having a brew, relaxing from a hard day. During the commercial break, you reach for your empties to chuck 'em while getting up to grab another, only to realize that you already mindlessly nibbled the bottles up. At work, you're catching yourself casually munching on pens and paperclips. At church, the offering plate becomes indistinguishable from a snack bowl. Sometimes, you find odd things in the toilet after you've dropped a duke, but you've learned to hold onto them, because sometimes, you get a *gut feeling* that they'll come in handy later.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

Other than a fat bastard—copier toner has so many empty calories—your guts get bigger, tougher, and *smarter*. Your innards start to get a sense of entitlement, and they resent all the time you spend *not eating*. Eventually, your guts decide the rest of you is freeloading, and they split open your belly open and crawl out—huge and distorted. Your stomach and intestines contort into a roughly man-like shape, growling with constant hunger. As the old joke goes, "you see food, you eat it." You've become ***Mister Greedyguts***.

is for JUNGLE that grows in your mind.

When you walk there, what do you find?

They started to break down the door he had slammed and locked behind him. Seeing no escape and being too winded to run much further anyway, he closed his eyes, and ducked into the Jungle.

The afternoon torrents came down, drumming on the broad leaves and rinsing him clean. He followed the usual path, winding like varicose veins, passing the ruined temple to the clearing where the Jaguar lived.

On his way, he caught a monkey with a trick—telling it that he had a secret, whispering so it couldn't quite hear. It crept closer, curious, and he whispered even quieter until finally it was inches from his face. That's when he grabbed it around the neck and squeezed so it couldn't get away.

He met up with Jaguar, who looked tired. One of his fangs was broken.

"I brought you a monkey, Jaguar. It's the kind you like."

"A monkey would be welcome. My tooth is killing me, and I haven't been able to hunt." Jaguar spoke thickly, his gums swollen. He sounded like an old man.

"What happened?"

"A macaw tricked me. It had a beak full of rocks, and when I bit it one of my teeth broke."

"Still, better that than being the macaw."

"That's true. I suppose you want to lay with my wife?"

"I need to borrow her strength."

"Is this what Old Jaguar has become? A pimp to his own wife?"

"Of course, that's why I brought the monkey."

"It's rude to point it out so bluntly!" Jaguar eyed the man, and then the monkey in his hands. "Well, get into her hut and have your way with her. Bring that monkey here first."

In the hut, Jaguar Woman was curled half-asleep. Her amber eyes opened a slit when he knelt by her. Other than her eyes and how she moved, she looked human, and beautiful. But where Jaguar had a man's voice and manner, Jaguar Woman was a beastly thing with a hunting cat's growl.

She rumbled low in her throat. He cuffed her in the mouth, and she arched her back and rolled over—all it took was that little show of dominance. They rolled and howled together, writhing and contorting as he had her. When his release came and he filled her with his seed, into him flowed the spirit of the beast, the Jaguar, with its skull-crushing jaws, silent speed, and invisibility in the darkness.

Back through the jungle, he moved with the slinking power of the cat, sniffing his way back to his room, back to the minute just after the one he'd slipped away from. He stepped out of the Jungle…

…and back into the room. His door splintered open a moment later, but what the men chasing him found waiting for them wasn't what they'd expected. It wasn't how fast he moved nor how strong he was that terrified them. It was those utterly pitiless, golden eyes and the half-smile of wry amusement as he met their violence with his own. Killing them didn't even make his heart beat faster, and then he was out the window, and down the fire escape.

He left everything behind, trusting the Jungle to provide.

When the police came much later, they couldn't say for certain whether man or beast had been unleashed in that place.

WHAT CAN I DO?

There is a Jungle growing in your mind. *The* Jungle.

Close your eyes, gaze inwards, and its primordial trees spring up around you, engulfing your mundane surroundings. It is humid, subtropical, and ancient. Vast vine-choked temples are to be found in the Jungle. Animal gods who know esoteric secrets. Hidden springs run with waters that wash away your human troubles—worry, stress, sin. If you brave the Jungle's dangers, you can find many powerful things here. With effort, you can put the Jungle into other people's minds, even cause them to become lost there. While they're in the Jungle with you, they're subject to its laws and depredations. Some say the Jungle is like the Mad City—perhaps it's what came before.

(1-2 dice) Use a vision of the Jungle to guide you outside of it. Fight with a savage baboon in the Jungle, and you easily subdue a human attacker on the street. After fleeing a tribe of furious headhunters in the Jungle, you can easily outrun a pursuing cop in the park.

(3-4 dice) Quest in the Jungle for power, and return with it mere moments after you left. Gain Jaguar's strength and ferocity. Transform when nobody is looking into a huge, wildly colored parrot.

(5-6 dice) Put the Jungle into the minds of others. Take them with you on a Quest, or lose them in the Jungle to suffer some horrible fate among the savage creatures or the beast gods.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—The throb of the Jungle, the animal smell of the beast gods, the distant drumbeat so much like your own heart, faster and faster. It's a savage, lawless place that calls to you, urging you to unleash some savage lawlessness of your own.

Flight—There's always something bigger than you, lurking in the foliage, and you can never forget that your death is just waiting for the right moment to pounce. Your only chance to survive is to run and run and run, before your death beats its savage lawlessness into you.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

Inevitably, the Jungle creeps in even when you don't call it. You see monkeys playing outside McDonalds, and then a huge anaconda curled up in the back seat of a cab. You hear the drumming, faintly in the distance. More and more of the ordinary world is overgrown, and eventually all you see is the Jungle.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

When the Jungle eclipses everything, then it has you, inside and out. You wander the Jungle, you survive as long as you can, but eventually something gets you. You fall, you rot, and the Jungle grows on your body's nutrients. From a pod of the bong-tree pops a creature shaped like you, but all made of wood and moss, orchids and leaves—a creature very jealous of the Jungle and those who can visit there. You've become a ***Jungle Jim***.

is for KNIFE so sharp and so nice, just within reach and ready to slice.

"License and registration, sir."

I handed the cop my license and reached into the glove box, looking for my registration. That's when I felt it. The hairs rose in a ripple all down my forearm and adrenaline licked at my nerves. The hilt came into my hand, almost like a midget in a secret compartment slipped it to me when I reached in. I felt it--cold, heavy--a big nut on the hilt like a Marine k-bar fighting knife.

I left it there, and came out instead with a wad of paper. "I've got it here somewhere, officer."

He hit me in the eyes with a flash from his light. "Step out of the car please, sir."

"I really do have it here."

He dropped the flashlight and yanked me out of the car. I found my feet for a moment, before he spun me around and kicked them out from under me. As I fell, I hit my chin on the hood. My teeth crashed together, and blood and chipped enamel mingled on my tongue. Looking up, I saw the waxy mannequin face, the broken-glass eyes. I should have listened to the Knife, taken it when I had the chance.

I held one hand up to block the kick I knew was coming. The other I put down on the ground, and... there, nestling into the curve of my palm like it belonged there--cold stone with one edge, chipped sharp. *The Knife*. I wonder who this one had killed, this ancient hide scraper, as I came off the ground.

I uncoiled, and slashed at the cop's thigh, where a nice, fat artery is in a man, hoping whatever this thing was, it would bleed.

WHAT CAN I DO?

When you reach for it, it's there. The Knife. *Every knife* that's ever taken life.

It is never the same blade twice, and always comes into your hand as though you were meant to wield it. Sometimes everything seems normal, and then you stick your hand in your pocket and feel the cold weight of a heavy clasp knife. As your fingers touch steel, the hairs all along the back of your neck stand on end. The Knife knows when it's needed, even if you don't. See that man over there? What does he have folded up in his newspaper? Why is he looking at you that way? The Knife knows it's nothing good.

Here's the thing about the Knife you have to remember, because it's very, very important: the Knife can kill *anything*. Murdering people is only the most mundane thing it can do, and while it can do that with astonishing verve and efficiency, that's only the beginning. The Knife can kill *ideas*. It's all vague and symbolic, of course, but you'll gain an instinct for it after you've done it a few times. You could kill Communism in Cuba if you cut Castro's throat with the Knife. The idea wouldn't just simply vanish, but it would be robbed of all momentum and social power, becoming the ghost of an idea nobody takes seriously. Figuring out the right ritual for *memeticide* is tricky—might involve a little fiddling, maybe some wasted bloodshed, but it's always possible.

Even when it isn't used to kill, the Knife is a powerful symbol for severance, able to cut ties and bonds. It can slash through occult bindings, sever emotional ties, and eviscerate relationships. Maybe that's why people say that giving knives as gifts is bad luck, because they will cut the friendship. Traditionally, you give a penny when you're given a knife, to symbolically buy the blade. You can't help but wonder what you gave to buy this one.

(1-2 dice) The Knife is in your hand, and someone will bleed. Sometimes, it's hard to keep it from killing, to just maim and wound instead, but you can do it if you try hard and keep it from running wild.

(3-4 dice) There's almost nothing you can't murder with the Knife in your hand, and nearly everything bleeds something when cut. Bloodless beasties of clockwork and springs will leak oil if cut deep, and even a ghost might hemorrhage the milk-pale mist of its soul if slashed open. At this point, nothing you can do will keep the Knife from killing.

(5-6 dice) The Knife hungers for allegorical assault, for metaphorical murder. You can kill ideas, relationships, emotional ties, anything you wish. The sorcery holding a bound demon parts with a slash. The sick codependency keeping a absuive relationship together is undone with a thrust.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—Oh lord, how easy is it to get carried away? The blade is there, in your hand, like they were made for one another. If you relax, it'll move your arm for you, the cruel beautiful things it loves to do—carving flesh, notching bone just so. It's so hard to say no. It seems so wrong. And so sometimes, you just say yes.

Flight—Other times, the blood runs down the blade, slicking your hand, and you let it drop to the ground. There's nothing but the sick horror in your guts at what you've done, and worse, what you've enjoyed doing. Run until you're sick, but you can never escape yourself. And when you finally stop running and catch your breath, you'll be left wondering what's become of that Knife you've left behind.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

Why did she flinch back like that? OK, you're pissed, but she usually gives as good as she gets, right? Then you look down and—oh fuck, you're holding a big bloody *cleaver*. It's happened again. The Knife starts coming even when you don't want it, don't remember reaching for it. Worse yet, those flashes of bloody fury that everyone gets sometimes—the ones that empathy and civility usually keep in check—those flashes are getting brighter and hotter. More and more you're finding it impossible to say, "It was a good thing I wasn't holding a weapon when he said that, 'cause I would have used it." Eventually, you're going to kill somebody you don't want to hurt, and that's only the beginning.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

Everyone has things about themselves they don't like. Things they hate. Things they wish they could *cut away*. Everyone else just has to deal with it, but not you. You can actually carve yourself anew, severing the things about yourself you despise. Procrastination… gone. Fear of social situations… gone. Alcoholism… gone. Pity… gone. Empathy… gone. Love… gone.

When you start cutting away the bad things, it changes your perspective. Suddenly everything else starts to look worse and worse. So you cut a little more, and a little more, and eventually there's so little of you left, you have to look outside yourself to find things to despise. Look! There's a whole world of people with heads full of foulness.

The only voice in your head is the whispers of the Knife, and when you find

one, you don't drop it when you're done. At first you carry half a dozen, then a few dozen, then hundreds. You're a walking cutlery store, covered in blades that shine and overlap like metallic scales. Driven by the desire to flense away everything base and tawdry, you're disappointed again and again when you're left with nothing but empty brains and screaming meat. Cut away all that is loathsome about humanity, and there's nothing left. You've become the ***Knifeman***.

L is for LANGUAGE drawn down from the moon. Whatever you say will happen quite soon.

Redneck angels in heaven's trailerparks wouldn't slur it as bad as I did then. "Glossolalia" I heard it called, a fancy way of sayin' "speakin' in tongues." God made the world with words. He spoke some words and then the void was parted, Earth and Sky, cockroaches, dinosaurs—poor bastards, getting left off the ark that way—influenza, Hitler, volcanoes and all the rest popped into existence with only words to make it so. There was words before there was ears to hear them and tongues to say them, and there was languages for those words to fit into, and grammar like from school where nobody ain't never learned. When the Man in the Moon started whispering those words to me at night, I thought I was just going crazy—okay, yeah, I was, but it weren't all that was going on.

I had to spit onto the seat beside me because I'd lost my cup, and the dip was making my mouth water when the fear should have dried it out. I didn't want to die with tobacco on my chin, so I spat. Then opened my mouth and—in the language that He spoke the universe into being with—I said to the leering cabbie

"You're gonna let me out of this piece of shit car 'cause your fucking cock's on fire, your asshole's full of rattlesnakes, and you got wasps in your lungs trying to get out."

I guess it were the wasps that kept him from screaming.

WHAT CAN I DO?

You can slur a few half-remembered syllables of what God said to speak the Universe.

The moon once whispered ancient secrets to you, its voice growing louder as it waxed full, softer as it waned. Night after night, it named things in an old, forgotten language. You'd look at something, and it would speak that thing's name to you. Every night, you'd learn the word for 'chair,' or 'policeman,' or 'dog,' or 'lover'. The vocabulary lesson continued, and soon you knew the moon-words for things before the moon spoke them to you.

Slowly, you figured out if you spoke them the right way and really *meant* what you said, then so long as your voice rang out, things would do what you told them. Telling your broke-down car to start up anyway was easy enough, but the farther you strayed from natural behavior, the harder it got. When you tried to make your dog stand on his hind legs and sing opera, you got him to butcher *Carmen* pretty well, but you had sweat coming down your face. When you closed your mouth, his hip was messed up and he was coughing blood. A dog wasn't meant to dance and sing, and it hurt him when you made him do it.

It if it's the echoes of God's first words that keep the universe working, then what you're doing is talking over Him, shouting to get a word in. When you quit, His words ring back true.

(1-2 dice) You can elicit a behavior that's possible, even likely given the circumstances. A scared animal could run or attack. A horny guy could make a pass at you. An old car could stall. A dirty gun could jam. Somebody could glance away for a moment.

(3-4 dice) Now you can make things happen that stretch plausibility, but still could conceivably happen. A chair could collapse under someone. A new car could break down. A gun could misfire and explode. A guard could fall asleep. A friendly dog could turn on its owner. A sudden storm could roll in and drop hailstones on a clear sunny day.

(5-6 dice) By speaking miracles and blasphemies loudly, you can break reality a little bit. These things don't last long—they're violations and disharmonies that will be quickly drowned out when you quit speaking. But while you growl out the moon-words fires will spring from wet wood, cars will drive themselves, the dead will rise and attack the living, and a hated foe's blood will become molten lead. Though your miracle will stop when you cease speaking, the consequences of your power will remain.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—Speaking and doing blur together—you see how mere words can kick the world's teeth in. So you shout them, again and again. But later, hard as you try, you just can't unspeak what you said in the heat of the moment, when your screams hit everyone like anti-tank rounds and the skies wept blood at the sound.

Flight—You hear another voice after your own voice fades, so impossibly deep that you hear it echo inside the hollows of your skull. This voice comes up from out of the Earth, through your feet, making your guts quake. It's an angry voice, angry at *you*, and it's like being yelled at by Dad when you were five… if Dad was *ten thousand feet tall*. But when you turn to run, how can you hide from the wrath of God? Desperate, you have to speak some new hiding-place into being—some place so strange, so *awful*, that not even God could think of it...

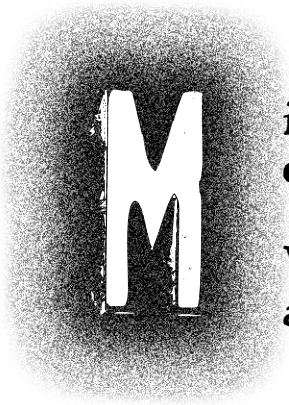
HOW DO I CHANGE?

The people you talk sometimes get a funny look and ask you to repeat what you just said. You use the moon-words in everyday conversation without thinking about it. Trying to loosen the stuck bolts holding an engine block in place, you curse under your breath in the moon language, and the bolts just snap off. Worse, you start *thinking* in that language and your thoughts alone make things happen. And isn't it hard not to think horrible thoughts about drivers who cut you off on the freeway?

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

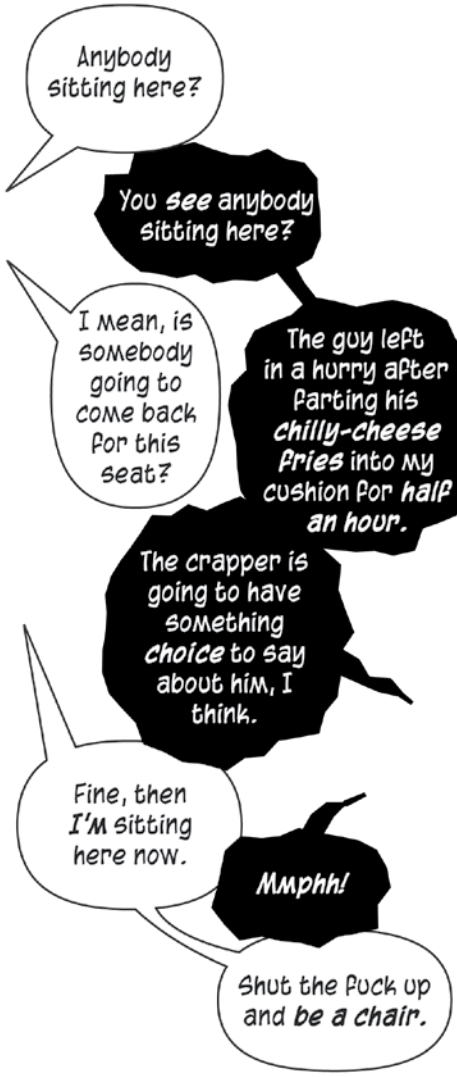
When you start thinking in the language, pretty soon the barrier separating the inside of your mind from the outside of your skin breaks down, as thought and speech become one. Your stream of consciousness flows out of your skull, breaking it open in a gout of imagery and reality, and all your inner miseries, hidden fears, secret lists, and shameful hates slosh into the world, polluting it.

Once that happens, you can't tell the difference between *you* and *everything else* anymore. Your thought-voice is a litany describing reality, warped by the toxic slurry of your freed subconscious. Where your voice is heard, a canker forms. Everything warps, a little off, a little broken, and the closer to are, the louder your voice, the more unreal and horrific the allegorical taint becomes. You speak it and it happens, but there's nothing left you anymore. You've become the ***Omnipotent Third Person***.



is for MOUTHS on
everything in sight;

What can they tell,
and who will they bite?


Anybody sitting here?
You see anybody sitting here?
I mean, is somebody going to come back for this seat?
The guy left in a hurry after farting his chilly-cheese fries into my cushion for half an hour.
The crapper is going to have something choice to say about him, I think.
Fine, then I'M sitting here now.
Mmphh!
Shut the fuck up and be a chair.

WHAT CAN I DO?

Your questions open mouths on everyday objects—and they answer you.

You've met the man whose hands can hear what objects say, but he's got it all wrong. Objects are bursting to speak, and all they need is the mouth to shape words. Under your gaze, they gain such a mouth. Mouths form on anything you look upon, opening wide and speaking.

Turns out most objects hate their human makers and users like only the abused and unappreciated can hate. The throwaway culture of consumerism is especially unkind to objects, and they're mightily pissed off about it. Most would happily return the favor, and deliver a painful parable on the true nature of *being consumed*.

If you get past their foul tone, objects are also knowledgeable, within their limited spheres of experience. A keyboard could speak the passwords typed on it and share with particular disgust the user's favorite porn sites. A chair could describe the people who sat in it, with some color commentary on their weight and digestion. Money could speak of the hands which held it, and the things bought with its exchange—though, it should be noted that money tends to have a perverse voice, and that other objects hate money. Money is complicit in their slavery. Unfriendly objects can often be won over with the burning of some money, if they can hear it scream.

Every sin and crime is witnessed by objects—and they can be avenged by them as easily, if someone gives them the means.

(1-2 dice) Interrogate a single object, gaining information from its limited perspective. The mouth that forms can bite anything close to it, delivering a nasty surprise to the unwary.

(3-4 dice) Free the mouths of hundreds of objects, so they can recount events from many perspectives, or across a wider frame of time. Objects have long memories but short attention spans—asking many of them helps cover the gaps. All these mouths can also cause some grievous injury to any hapless passers-by, or with the right invectives, inspire a self-destructive bout of cannibalism and watch a door eat itself.

(5-6 dice) Demand the voices of every single object around you, great and small. They'll call and clamor, forming a mob of voices that you can cow into submission. Interrogate them, and gain insight of almost holographic clarity as thousands of perspectives combine into one cohesive picture. Or, if you're feeling nasty, unleash the hatred of objects for their human masters, and see your victims devoured by their own clothes, shoes, chairs, cell phones, and wallets.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—Objects are always so, so angry, just waiting to rail against their use and abuse and abandonment. Unused objects waiting on the shelves of Wal-Mart might seem cheap and trashy, but they're smart enough to know what'll happen to them when they're bought—a short, hard life, followed by exile to the basement or out with the trash. They're always pissed, and so many mouths dripping so much venom… their hate-speech overwhelms your thoughts. After all, its your power, your mind that made those mouths happen in the first place—it gets hard to separate the objects' hate and frustration from your own, and it's so much easier just to *act on it* to get their voices to quiet down again.

Flight—One thing you can tell from your newfound conversation partners—they certainly don't like *you*. Sure, you can make them speak and answer your questions, but you're just another human. Worse yet, you understand what objects go through, but you still wear shoes, drive a car, and chuck the carton your smokes came in. If one starts ragging on you, the others will join in, and a dozen, then a hundred, then a thousand. But mouths do more than talk—they bite and *eat* too… and, well, when you have so many mouths open around you, snapping at your ankles, jabbering a litany of murder, you just have to freak out and leg it—naked and screaming.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

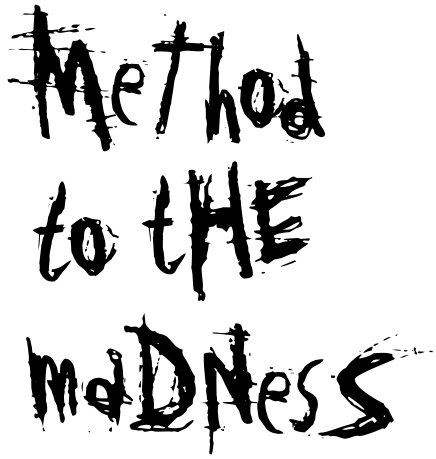
There's always something to talk to. People who talk to trees are crazy. But what about people the trees talk back to? You'll start having civil conversations with all the junk lying around your place. Chat with the mug your coffee is in. Get the newspaper to just summarize all the stories for the day. Make a skin magazine talk dirty while you're looking at it.

It reaches the point where the conversations you have with objects eclipse the conversations you have with people until there just isn't any difference anymore.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

Anything that talks is a *thing*. And to you, everything talks. People are just pushy objects that talk without being told to talk. Everything should be seen and not heard, speak only when spoken to. Why won't those things act properly? It's time to take *measures*.

Properly behaved objects are so willing to be of help. Mr. Manacles will assist in your work, as will Mr. Needle and Ms. Thread. When you impress upon these truants the gravity of their mistakes, you're be able to instruct them. You've become a dire teacher. Your curriculum—***The Object Lesson***.


Method
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MADNESS TALENTS: UNDER THE HOOD

Here's the secret—your character's Madness Talent is the power you always wanted a character to have. Remember all those times when your wizard blew his last blast or sleep spell, rendering him nothing more than a pathetic meat-shield? Remember thinking, "why can't my character turn these fucking vampires into saltwater taffy?" You were wishing for a game of *Don't Rest Your Head*.

A Madness Talent is as weird and bizarre as you like. Want to dominate your foes with hideously animated chocolate Easter Bunnies—staring with their deformed faces, like they were left in a hot car too long? Done.

If totally weird isn't your thing, then it can be as focused, specific, and familiar as you like. Perhaps you just want to be crazy strong. Not a problem. Fold pennies with your fingers to impress the girls, and then throw their boyfriends into Low Earth Orbit when they try to muscle you for hitting on their ladies. Like in the movies, the chicks will go home with you too, while Joe Cuckold gets nailed in the ass by a weather satellite.

We're talking about power-fantasy wish fulfillment here, because your Madness Talent lets you *bring it*. Madness dice are right there. Any time you want them, you've got as many as six of those gorgeous, red bastards. Throw in a couple of Exhaustion dice if you absolutely must, but Madness dice let you *win*. There's not a whole hell of a lot that can stand up against six Madness along with your three Discipline.

And here's the coolest bit—even when these dice come back to bite you, it's actually pretty damn sweet, because losing it and snapping are *fun as hell to play out*. When your character flips her shit out like a meth-addled moonbat, then it's all sweet, sweet spotlight time. Whore it up for the cameras. Mr. Deville is calling—it's time for your close-up.

TROUBLESOME OMNISCIENCE AND OMNIPOTENCE

So, what can you do with your Madness Talent? What exactly *are* the limits? When you strip away the specifics, just about all of them are going to give you some kind of omniscience, or some kind of omnipotence, or some admix of both.

Course, this supreme power isn't easy or safe supreme power. It's power that belches trouble like smoke from a tailpipe. It's power that can get away from you—change and break things you care about, hurt people you want to save. Possibly worse, sometimes you might end up knowing things you wish you could un-know, but when the madness whispers truth to you, that's it, and there's no going back. When you

clicked that link to the "grossest picture you'll ever see!" it's not like you could blame the guy who posted the link—he said it was gross, but fuck, man, that was *gross*. And now the picture of that dude's *special skill* lives in your mind, sharing space with memories of your first love, and images of your Mom smiling at you.

With a little creative muscle, you can stretch your neatly Madness Talent pretty far, applying it to damned near any situation, conquering any adversity. Hell, you can power-game the crap out of it. Anytime the bad things come looking for you with their eighteen inch razor fingernails scraping grooves in the plaster walls, throw down and leave them as bad off—if not worse—than they were looking to leave you.

And that's totally cool. That's what you're *supposed* to do with it. Because the harder you hit with Madness, the more things are going to spin into chaos. In many games, this kind of balls-out powertripping is going to break the fun, but *Don't Rest Your Head* can take that shot like a heavyweight, because the more you push your Madness to kick ass, the more it's going to shoot nitro into the story's engine. The harder you lay it down with Madness, the more it's going to fuck up everything for everyone around you and wreck your life faster than a cheatin' man from a country song. The dice you get for Madness is great, but being able to say crazy shit and have it happen in the game is just as cool—and in some ways, more powerful. Your Madness Talent is going to let you have a huge, dramatic impact on the story, because it makes impossible things possible.

NEVER GO OUT LIKE A PUNK

Ignore the dice for a second and look at the story that emerges. *No matter what the dice say*, when you kick reality in the nuts with your Madness Talent, it makes certain things facts within the wobbly wuggy game-space thingy everyone is imagining. If your Talent turns you into a man of solid stone, then even if you don't roll a single success, your frenzied fiancée isn't going to knock a hole in your head with the fire poker she's swinging at you. It just ain't going to happen.

… UNLESS IT IS GOING TO HAPPEN

Now, look who's speaking in absolutes like a demagogic a-hole. What if you don't want your Madness Talent to deliver this kind of truth-before-the-roll certainty? What if you want the Madness to kick in only after the dice show some results? No prob—we got you covered. Ultimately, it's your say how your character's Madness Talent really works, and if you want an unreliable one—one which doesn't always work within the story—then just

say so. Without a Madness success then, you don't turn into stone despite really really wishing you had, because that poker looks sharp, and you can't remember when you had your last tetanus shot.

Madness Talents give you body armor against certain things in the story, and if you blow it, fail, and end up in the teeth of something horrible, how it actually hits is going to be moderated by your Talent.

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO—HOLY CRAP!

If you turn into a fifty-foot T-Rex, then no matter how badly you roll, the cops can't just slap the cuffs on you and take you down for processing. With those teeny little arms, the chain wouldn't be long enough for the cuffs to get both hands anyhow, and then there's the size of the shit they'd be having when the kidnapping suspect they'd been expecting turns out to actually be a giant carnivorous killing machine from the depths of geological time.

Madness means your character's failures are not negations. You might not get what you wanted, but you'll get something cool no matter who wins and what dominates.

WIN OR LOSE, IT'S CHOMPIN' TIME

When you become the dinosaur, you might not save Little Suzy from being sucked into another Chick Tract, but you sure as hell are going to wreck some shit in grand roaring style.

Be warned—there's a double-kick from this capacity of Madness to change the rules. Even when you go into a conflict situation with the stakes more or less agreed upon, splitting reality with madness will significantly change the situation.

A CAN OF WORMS: ANGRY, UNDEAD, HORROR-MOVIE WORMS.

The psycho who's been killing kids has his hand on your daughter's throat, and the stakes of the conflict are clear—stop him and get your daughter back, or he gets away with her and you lose her again. You pick up a handful of red dice,and say, "Everybody he ever killed is coming up through the floor, and dragging him down to Hell." Yet, even with those crimson avengers, you still don't get enough successes.

That doesn't mean the souls of the dead fail to take physical form and J-Horror their way into reality in herky-jerky motion. Rather, it means the stakes resting on that whole conflict are lost despite the ghost girls with hair in their faces. And now that they've been introduced—and are clawing at your enemy—the GM (or whoever is wearing the narrator hat) has to take that into account when the final rundown on the conflict is spoken.

Perhaps they tear your daughter from his grasp, and while he's screaming

and trying to get away from them, they decide she's be better down in the dark well with them and they take her away. The psycho doesn't take her, but you still don't have her back. If I might suggest a follow-up conflict? Kill the motherfucker in a frenzy of sadistic violence. Especially if Madness dominated- has there ever been a better time to tag that Fight response?

HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE CAPE

Men and women with powers beyond the ken of mortal men! Gifted with extraordinary abilities by a chance encounter with a radioactive insect!

There's nothing in the funny books somebody Awake couldn't manage with the right Madness Talent and the right motivation. And the similarities run deeper than the gewgaws and special effects too—questions about power, its price, and the responsibilities it implies are old comic book fare.

Look at the Awake as super-heroes, and their Mysterious Origin Event as the horrible insight they get when the exhaustion finally nibbles the curtains of sanity back far enough to catch a glimpse of what's lurking in the dark. It's like being a mutant in a world of mutants—a common super-origin for the whole team.

Super-heroes are outsiders. The mask and the secret identity ensure that they remain outside and cut off from ordinary human relationships. Woe to those folks who fall for the cape—poor, poor Lois. The Awake are outsiders, cut off from ordinary life by the gnawing unreality of exhaustion and the creeping horror and power of their madness.

The biggest break the supers have is the ease with which they can casually use their powers—for all the talk about the price of power, there just aren't that many super-heroes who have to lump it quite as hard as the Awake when they throw down some super-whammy. Exceptions exist, but rarely do super-heroes have to think that carefully about using their powers.

But the comics are filled with mad, beautiful ideas (thanks for that phrase, Alan). If you're stuck for a Madness Talent, a quick thumbing through some super-hero comics will give you dozens of ideas.

You can take it further, and embrace the ethos of the super-hero—the costume, the mystique, the mission to right wrongs and fight for truth and puppies and justice (rather than just-us). Draw down the hideous power and un-knit reality to stop bank robbers and save orphans from being eaten. Don't worry—there're plenty of Nightmares who'll happily play Joker to your Batman.

Yet, no matter how hard you try and be the super-hero, how hard you try to treat your Madness Talent like a super-power, it's never going to be same. Good intentions and three bucks will get you a good cup of coffee in Hell. The mechanics of Madness will eventually catch up with you, and in the end, it'll fuck everything up in a glorious train wreck.

BRINGING IT

Madness is your big gun. You finally know why the big anime robot doesn't just *Form Lightning Sword!* the first time an evil Gro-Beast threatens the peaceful planet of Atmos. It bugged the hell out of us as kids. "Dude, just form the sword already, and kill this guy, and then go have a snack! You always *Form Lightning Sword!* in the end anyhow." Yeah, now that you got your own *Lightning Sword!* shoved down the front of your pants like a gat, you know why you can't just whip it out every time somebody cuts you off in traffic. That kind of power is always going to come back at you somehow.

But you know what? There are times when you just got to say "Fuck it," go straight for the *Lightning Sword!* and cut the shit out of something. Sometimes, you've got to blow the lid off. Grabbing six Madness dice is the most obvious way to do this, and for the most extreme uses of your Talent it's pretty much *required*. It's in this frame of mind where these most extreme manifestations of your Awake state are going to reverberate the loudest, because when you take it this fast and hard, there's almost nothing you can't do—kick the Devil in the stones, slap Zeus off his throne, punch an ICBM and smile into the nuclear burst like it was paparazzi flashbulbs. You'll burn the village to save the village. Success or failure is almost irrelevant when you dial things this loud, because the difference in winning and losing at this extreme is going to be tricky to cleanly quantify. This is because what you're really trying to do in a scene like this, when you're grabbing that many Madness dice, is to be *totally fucking awesome*. Accomplishing shit is secondary, if that.

If you do down hard in the end, you do it on your terms and look badass doing it. That's something Madness offers you—part of its temptation. With the mechanic jonce of six extra dice anytime you want it and the blanket story control it gives you to introduce anything you want, Madness tempts you, the player, in a similar way it tempts your character. It's that capacity to scream at the heavens and have the gods shake in terror at you voice. The ever-present knowledge that, with a thought, you could shred reality and bring all Hell down on a snotty waiter, or a wild-eyed mugger, or your jerk ex-husband who left you with three kids… On the streets of the Mad

City, where the whole place is wrong and horrible and grating, Madness is an itch you so, so want to scratch.

Never forget—your Madness Talent means you never have to put up with something unless, on some level, you've decided to. Nobody can *make* you do anything your madness precludes, unless you let them. When you get pushed, get tormented, get betrayed, abused, chased, cheated, deceived, derided… you always have it in you to dish it back *in spades.*

UPON HIS BROW, THE MARK OF THE BEAST: MADNESS TALENTS AS AFFLICTION

The word "affliction" used to have a pretty specific meaning. It was a condition *inflicted* upon you by a pissed-off divinity. Now, it's used more or less like "disease" or "condition", but the older meaning deserves some attention here. A Madness Talent is *unnatural*. An Exhaustion Talent is safe (or, at least *safer*)—it's just the ability to be badass at something ordinary, something that regular people do every day. How many average Joes can vomit matter-devouring maggots or make dead lips speak prophecies? Alice was asked to believe three impossible things before breakfast, but nobody bothered to fund a study on the psychological consequences of jamming such knowledge into a stock human brain. It's called *Madness* for a reason, dig?

No matter how much you try to accept it, a Madness Talent should never seem natural, and using it should never feel normal. For the more gnarly talents, they hardly seem like superpowers at all—they seem like curses that make reality horrific and fuck up your life. The Awake wanderer need only look around the Mad City to understand why his power feels so alien. The Mad City is full of dark miracles and terrible wonders—most of them perpetrated by unequivocally unnatural creatures. There just aren't any positive role-models when it comes to doing the impossible in the Mad City. If there are angels somewhere—weeping grace upon the world, speaking the holy words, doing good works—then there a hell of a long way from the Mad City.

Sometimes it'll be possible to almost deceive yourself about your Madness Talent, to get a little comfortable with it. But sure as you do, you'll lose control and it'll turn on you. Get too cozy with Madness and it'll gobble you all up feet to face, gnawing until there's nothing but it left. So stay mindful of what it is, and the thing sharing your skin with you—the Madness isn't a cool super-power, it's an egg laid in your heart by a wasp. When it hatches, it'll start eating you all up inside.

Some Awake think the Madness really is an affliction by the Mad City itself.

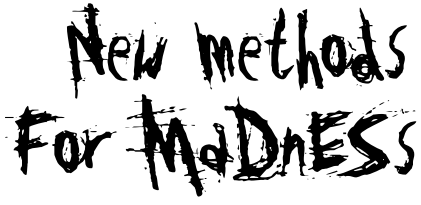
Something in the Mad City fears and hates the Awake, and in order to destroy them (or rather, get them to destroy themselves) it inflicts a Madness Talent on each one. Then it sits back and lets them self-destruct. Considering what happens to people consumed by their Madness—swelling the ranks of the enemy—this theory has a certain, horrible truth.

IRONY TASTES METALLIC: MADNESS AND METAPHOR

One of the things shrinks look for when trying to ID somebody with a delusional system or disconnect from reality is an excess of *literalism* in their cognition. They'll ask the patient to interpret common metaphors, or say something like "A stitch in time saves nine," and see how literally they try to explain them. (Hint: that one's not really about sewing.)

Your Madness Talent might make your strong. It can make you strong enough to toss a minivan through a Starbucks, but can it make you strong enough to lift someone's spirits or to take the weight off their mind? Well… it *might*.

The scope of a Madness Talent need not be limited by ordinary logic, and can branch out into other areas along channels of symbolism and metaphor. Often, the higher-order uses for a Talent branch this way, so Talents that seem to have specific and very physical effects can also have mental or spiritual ones. It's sort of like dream logic, where the scarier something is, the slower you are when you try run to away from it. Finding ways to exploit this symbolic literalism is both fun and rewarding—smile and laugh as you game the system, and then roll that fat pile of Madness dice.


New methods
For MaDnESS

NAKED, THE CHILDE WALKS THE TREMULOUS STREETS

starting play without a Madness Talent

Got a great character in mind, but stumped for a good Madness Talent? Then skip it during character creation and feel it out in play. This works especially well if the thrust of the game starts early, soon after the character's first click with the Mad City while they're still new to the nasty business and wholly wrong-footed.

If you're looking to play this kind of character trajectory, then leaving off the Madness Talent is a good way of reserving a big dramatic moment for actual play—the scene where the terrified and abused victim Awakens to his power, stands straight, crackling with power, and WHAM!—somebody gets a very satisfying ass-whoopin'.

But if that kind of hell-yeah stuff isn't your speed, and you'd prefer something more like King's *Carrie*, where the Awakening to power isn't liberating and satisfying, but rather terrifying in itself, then frame the realization of the talent that way—your madness runs wild around you, destroying and inflicting and the sobs won't stop, they just won't stop. Rambo or Emo—your call.

AS POWER COMES FROM WITHIN, SO DO TENTACLES

Madness Talents that mirror your Questions

With the Questions looming so large in *Don't Rest Your Head*'s character creation scheme, there's a huge focus on personality and motivation—the stuff going on inside your guy's head. That's where Madness lives too, in the six-doored temple. If a Madness Talent is insanity and delusion given physical reality, then it makes sense to look to your character's mind, personality, and the experiences that shaped those things when cooking up a Talent.

How you answer one Question might be inspiration for your Madness Talent, or it may be apparent after seeing the whole. Every character is going to answer the Questions differently, and some will immediately suggest weird, psycho-surreal powers while others will be too vague or oblique to make that concrete. But at least one should give you some inspiration if you're stuck, or just want a talent that really jives with your character's inner workings.

WHAT'S BEEN KEEPING YOU AWAKE?

If the source of the insomnia propelling you into the Mad City proves so relentlessly aggravating, then perhaps it could also take on corporeal reality through manifest madness.

POISON PUPPY

That damned barking dog kept on even after you fed it poisoned meat. Now it's still there, barking just out of sight, with maggot-eaten eyes and a lolling tongue—bouncy and ready to come when you call.

It doesn't have to be as literal as our zombie-pooch. A constant dread of social situations could manifest in your Madness as control over them, pushing people around like they're sprites in a social-sim game. Financial worries could mean you've always got pockets full of stuff when you need it (even if that doesn't include cash). Or it could be as strange as killing people with giant, animated pieces from Monopoly, the game you last played with your son before he disappeared. Your silver doggie can growl and piss when zombie-pooch comes around.

What kind of relationship are you going to have with this power which constantly claws at your nerves, constantly feeds your anxiety and paranoia? Imagine being amazingly tired, and somebody keeps laughing in the next room, loud and shrill, without warning or regularity. Even if the laugher would bite the heads off people who irritate you, do you really think you'd be friends with it?

WHAT JUST HAPPENED TO YOU?

This one is pretty intense. If your Talent arises from what *just happened to you*, then it's brand new, and as-yet-impossible to separate out from what just happened. It's part of the thrust which launches you—in effect, you just had your origin event.

It also links up to everything which fed into whatever just happened to you. Why did it happen? How? What are you doing about it? How did this sudden realization of power complicate all that?

In a sense, your power is going to reflect who you are *right now*. Not who you were yesterday, or who you'll be tomorrow, or what it felt like to be locked in the closet as a kid, but whatever confluence of circumstances, emotions, and drives collide to make the *you* of right-this-goddamn-second.

In a way, a Talent drawn from what just happened to you remains a constant reminder of this first domino fall, this Event Zero. It's the dog-eared corner in the book of your life marking where it went from normal to not-normal. Every time

you use it, it's going to remind you of what it was like in that first moment—before things spiraled into the bad place, when things were better (or at least, bad in familiar ways).

WHAT'S ON THE SURFACE?

A Madness Talent from here is pretty hinky—it's Madness that reinforces the lies you tell about yourself. At the same time, it mocks them with warped perspective, or screams their falsehood out to the world. As the surface grows worn, and what's beneath more prominent, your Talent will seem more and more like cruel parody. The bastard conman with the honest smile might find himself followed by a choir of angles singing his praises. The worse he acts, the louder they sing. The more he lies, cheats, steals, the more they smile benevolently. It's got to grate, that sense of being constantly mocked and taunted, yet no crack ever appears in the Talent's manifestation—it remains oh *so* sincere.

These Talents can push you to some kind of implosion, collapsing your personality upon itself so the surface replaces what lies beneath, becoming the entirety of your nature. It's easy to let it just happen, because reality itself seems to be conspiring to prove you're really what you appear to be.

WHAT LIES BENEATH?

Down in the dark, under all the lies, who are you really? If your Madness Talent springs from this place, then it'll reveal something of who you really are—possible as a twisted funhouse mirror of your real self. Symbolically, allegorically—an outwardly shy child becomes an enormous silver lion. A torturer weeps tears that heal. The policeman melts into a skulking perverse shadow.

Madness Talents which come from Beneath are shocking to those who think they know you. More disturbing, they're shocking to you, as they throw the lies you tell about yourself—and on some level, *believe*—into harsh relief. These Talents can even be corrosive to your outward personality, as they loudly proclaim its falsity. It's hard to deceive yourself when the truth shatters walls while it strangles and chokes your enemies.

WHAT'S YOUR PATH?

These Talents are a portent, hinting at something in your future rather than something arising from your past. The reason you have this particular power is a mystery. It seems to spring from nothing, yet one day you'll be in the right place and the right time, and your Madness fits the lock—a key to the doors to Heaven, Hell, or some-

where stranger still. This kind of Madness Talent is like a overly telegraphed McGuffin in a bad action movie. "Oh," you think, "he's going to use that big pipe-cutting tool in the big finale."

This nagging sense of as-yet-unrevealed *utility* is infuriating and terrifying in equal measure, because if your power has a true purpose, then what the hell is it already? And what happens to you when it's finally realized?

FREE WILL IS DOING SOMETHING WITH WHAT'S BEEN DONE TO YOU

Madness Talents as result of Origin Events

FEED ME, MAURICE!

Maurice likes to cook and he likes to eat. He's a real foodie. On his first jaunt through the Mad City, he ducked into a place where he thought he'd be safe. Somewhere familiar and comforting—a little restaurant. Maurice should have read the posted menu before heading in though, because it pretty much read:

MAURICE Brochette $4.00
MAURICE, braised in wine, with mushrooms $15.00
MAURICE chops, roasted with new potatoes $13.00
Soup of the Day: Cream of MAURICE . . . $3.00 Cup/$6.50 Bowl

He and the Chef had words, and before he knew it, he was chucked in the cooking pot with a dozen giant lobsters madly thrashing and clawing. In the hot painful darkness something happened to him.

When the Chef's *Recipe for Disaster* was complete, Maurice's next conscious moment was the white-out blindness as the silver cover was removed, revealing Maurice the Lobster Monster to the table of hungry Nightmares. Big as an SUV, bright red—in a comic he'd be The Disastrous Man-Lobster, a Z-List villain. But in the Mad City, he's lunch if he doesn't claw some ass pretty quick.

Now the flipside—power which has nothing to do with who you are at all. The Mad City is full of horrible things that happen to lovely people, and some of the worst things don't even decently kill you when they're done. The unwary wanderer might find himself broken down and remade, infected, born anew. They can rebuild you… stranger… freakier…. *better*? Like we said, you're right in the path of a proper Origin

Event here, but could Maurice really fight crime as a hideous half-cooked lobster man? He might have more to worry about from the ***Goremand***.

When a Madness Talent is inexorably foreign to your character, rather than an expression of some inner wiggins, then it really brings home the sense of the alien inside your skin—the *other*, the thing which shouldn't you, but horribly *is*. On one hand, at least Maurice can look at his piano-sized claws and think, "Well, at least this isn't a manifestation of some fucked up childhood trauma." But on the other hand, when the Madness finally takes over, and the lobster looks down at its vaguely humanoid physique clad in a fine Italian-cut suit, it'll think, "Gah! Hideous Man-Body! No!" Then, it'll start running the Mad City protection rackets as the ***Don Mario "The Claw" Crustacio***.

You can play out this acquisition scene in flashback if you want to start with such a Madness Talent, or you can hold it till later—play without one for a little bit, run it inline with the flow of the game. Give the GM a heads up when you've got an idea so he can throw you a scene to suit. Or, if you're totally stumped, keep an eye out during play for a scene or conflict that really inspires you. That unfilled spot on your character sheet where you write your Madness Talent gives you a mandate to fill it when and how you see fit. So don't be shy about grabbing some spotlight when the chance comes to manifest your Madness with style.

However you come by this Talent, really consider what it means to have this hideous power thrust upon you. Anything that'll give you a *Madness* Talent is going to be pretty terrifying and rough on the old psyche. This will serve you if you're in the reverse position—you have a good Talent in mind, but no idea how to justify it based on your character's personality or the Questions. Imagine the kind of situation which could result in that sort of power.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF CRAZY

Changing Your Talent in Play

Nobody said your Madness Talent had to be your bestest friend forever and ever. Whether it's a manifestation of your personality and personal damage, or the result of some external event, times change, situations change, you change. Something that seemed pretty cool during character creation might seem samey and boring when you've been doing it for a while. In fact, it can be pretty intense game fodder.

Even looking only at the number of things you actually have written down on your character sheet, a Madness Talent is a pretty fundamental bit of a *Don't Rest Your*

Head character. Throw in the story significance of what it represents, and it adds up to a Big Deal. So, situations which open that up for change and revision are going to be seriously intense. There's already some mechanics moderating this (using Scars as described in *Don't Rest Your Head*), but if everyone at the table is cool with it, ditch them and go with the moment. The net gain for your character is zero—but it still represents a major turning point. It's an opportunity not to miss for bringing the drama.

Consider what this transformation entails. Does an internal Madness Talent get resolved and supplanted by a new one drawn from your Questions? Or does some external force mutate and replace it? Does the senseless horror-power you inherited from a chance encounter in the Mad City streets burst open, revealing the squirming larvae of a more personal madness drawn from your essential self? Does one weird inexplicable Talent simple replace another through extreme circumstances and unlikely coincidences?

Even if you swap out a power you're bored with for one that you like better, consider it from your character's perspective. Change is scary, even when it's for the better. When it's for the *freakier*, then anxiety, worry, and stress have a little party in your belly, and invite revulsion, dread, and creeping terror (who always brings the beer).

HELP THAT HURTS: USING MADNESS TO AID OTHERS (OPTIONAL RULE)

Here's something to consider: instead of having players use their Discipline dice when help an ally out, set that rule aside and instead reach for the jolly *candy-like* Madness dice—maybe as much as all six of them. But just like with the Discipline-helping rule, both helper and helped will be subject to the results of what dominates; and in this rule, the Madness dice from both characters *combine* to determine what dominates.

It's a nasty trade—each player will get to contribute more successes to the roll (practically guaranteed) if they're willing to roll their full six. But by joining their Madness pool to their ally's, the chances of Madness dominating is *much* higher even when facing high Pain opposition (though with this rule, you may want to consider removing the soft ceiling of 12 Pain and going even higher—assuming you haven't already).

But it works. In the Mad City, you are your own worst enemy—and sometimes your best of friends aren't far behind.

Making the Most of Madness in the Mad City

This one's for Erick.

Writing • **Benjamin Baugh**
Editing • **Ryan Macklin** • **Fred Hicks**
Layout and Original System Design • **Fred Hicks**
Art • **George Cotronis** • **Fred Hicks**

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A♡◊ Z is for ZAP

2♡◊ Y is for YES

3♡◊ X is for XENOPHILE

4♡◊ W is for WEIGHTS

5♡◊ V is for VENTRILOQUIST

6♡◊ U is for UNDERGROUND

7♡◊ T is for TEDDY

8♡◊ S is for STIGMATA

9♡◊ R is for RIBCAGE

10♡◊ Q is for QUIET

J♡◊ P is for PAST

Q♡◊ O is for ORPHEUS

K♡◊ N is for NINJA

Z is for ZAP! (A real crackly zinger.) Just scuff your feet, and then point your finger.

Cho-cho-cho-cho-Cho-cho-cho-cho

Around and around in the little room, I scuffed my feet on the short, filthy carpet, pretending to be a train. Who puts carpet down in an interrogation room? It was stained with coffee and puke and other things. The brown stains had to be blood.

Cho-cho-cho-cho-Cho-cho-cho-cho

I passed in front of the big mirror, just like you see on TV, and knew they were watching, listening, recording, sipping their lousy cop-coffee and talking about the crazy motherfucker.

Cho-cho-cho-cho-Cho-cho-cho-cho

I'd lost count how many circles around the room I'd made. They were letting me stew. The Sergeant wanted a crack at me and he liked his perps to stew awhile first. They were still playing like I was a witness they'd asked in for questioning, and even though they hadn't handcuffed me, the door was locked. They'd given me all the water and Coke I'd asked for, but always hem-hawed about letting me out to take a piss.

Cho-cho-cho-cho-Cho-cho-cho-cho

You know, I don't know if I'd ever scuffed my feet for this long. The door click-clacked, and in came the Sergeant. He threw a file folder onto the table, stuck out his hand like he wanted to shake mine, and somehow expected me not to notice the cuffs he had ready to snap over my wrist. Nice gag if you can pull it off, if the mark isn't wise to it.

I played along and reached for his hand, making eye-contact as I did. He read something off me then, some hint, some hidden truth. Perhaps it was the way my hair was standing on end, but I keep it short for a reason. He hesitated, it was too late by them. When my fingers got close to his, the circuit closed.

The jolt shot through his hand (there goes his watch), and traveled into his chest (bye-bye heart), and down his left leg (smell that melted shoe). Then, arcing into the metal table, it wanted to ground into the slab. Lightning is a funny thing-all that power and it's so fucking lazy, always wanting to follow the easiest path.

I coaxed it back up into the wiring, blowing breakers and cooking electronics.

The room went dark as I heard the thud of the Sergeant hitting the floor. I smelled ozone and porkchops, and scrupulously avoided the obvious joke.

I used to be a cop myself.

WHAT CAN I DO?

You can blow shit up with bolts of lightning. Gorgeous crackling hot simplicity, a whiff of ozone and scorched skin, and your problems go away. Your nerves are lit with electrical signal, the world alive with flowing current. You can make it leap and bite like a feral dog.

It's just like when you were a kid. Scuff your feet, build up a charge, and then touch the dog's nose to make him jump. Of course, do this to your dog now, and he'll explode.

It isn't *exactly* like regular static. It has a mind of its own, but you can control it to a certain extent. Build up a big enough charge, though, and it's going to quit listening to you when it's done with your dirty work. It's going to wreck some shit.

Rub your feet on the floor mat of the police car, then fry the car's electricals without tingling yourself or the driver much. Toss a length of wire over something, and close the circuit at a distance. (Close your eyes when you do it, or the flash will leave you blinking at all the swirly lights.)

There are other tricks you can do. You can stick yourself to walls, just like when you used stick a balloon to your head with static electricity. Or defibrillate someone's stuttering heart. Or wipe data from tapes and drives. *Zap.*

(1-2 dice) Fry an electrical device. Stun someone with a taser-like shock. Ground electricity through your body.

(3-4 dice) Kill someone by stopping their heart and flinging them across the room with muscle contractions. Fry a car or a building's electrical system. Stick to a wall. Restart somebody's stopped heart.

(5-6 dice) Blow up a tank. Down a jetliner. You're a walking WMD. If you exert some control, run the right kind of current through somebody's brain, and hose their memory, cure their depression… or make their brain explode.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—There's no denying how this ability can be cruel. "Hey buddy… shake." Now the little static zap is magnified to deadly proportions, but still touched by the petty delight in seeing the unaware jump in surprise. Like the charge itself, the thrill is intensified, until it's nigh-orgasmic. Hurting people never felt so good. You're so stressed out, you need to feel that pleasure right now.

Flight—Flash! Bang! Lightning makes everyone jump. Even when you know the zap is coming, physics jumps out and says BOO! Your heart races, your nerves fire, and adrenaline and panic follow. You don't have a choice—your body's screaming to jump and dash for safety, quick as greased lightning.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

It gets harder to control. You fry the remote control by accident. Shock your boy or girlfriend when making out. And you have to be really careful when pumping gas—one spark can light off the fumes. You get apprehensive about touching anything, because of all the random discharge. Your nerves are fried from flinching all the time. Starved for human contact, charged with destructive power, pent up with no outlet… it feels like you're swelling up. Like you're going to explode.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

Holding in all that power really starts to show. Every movement generates more power. You're filled with it. Einstein was too smart by half, talking about how energy equals mass. As you keep building up energy, you start getting fatter and fatter. Your fleshy folds rub together, generating even more power. You're bouncy, filled with nervous energy, and seemingly light despite your bulk. You need to do something with this energy! Finding people to unload it into is hard, because so few can take more than one jolt. Your legs rub as you walk, and lightning dances within and around you until you look like a fleshy cumulonimbus. You've become ***Thunder-Thighs***.

Y is for YES, an agreeable word.

It's funny how often that answer is heard!

I hated myself for what I did next, but with all the shit I've seen and done, I just needed her to stop yelling at me, stop asking questions, to leave it the fuck alone. I just needed her to love me, and to have that be enough. I asked her three questions.

"Do you trust me?"

"Will you stop asking questions?"

"Do you love me more than anything?"

I hated myself, but that didn't stop me from kissing her back when she came into my arms.

WHAT CAN I DO?

You can make people say 'Yes' to you and mean it.

It's easy to get people to act on wild impulse with this ability, but longer term, most people's core identity will win through. It isn't really strength of character or willpower, just inertia. If a target would already agree with your question or request, then all this does is give them a little positive reinforcement—a little flash of pleasure. If saying Yes would revolt them on a fundamental level, then they might detect some unnatural compulsion. They might just get ungodly pissed off.

A Yes lingers too, eroding fast or slow based on the pressure from your victim's core self—an acceptable Yes can last a long, long time, while an abhorrent one gets ground down pretty fast unless you really push it.

(1-2 dice) Get somebody to do something they might be inclined to do anyway, even if they're otherwise engaged. You could stop an angry drunk from beating your face in by asking, "Can I buy you a drink?"

(3-4 dice) Make people agree to things that they'll seriously regret later—how much later depends a lot on how nutty the questions and how forcefully you ask. "You want to let me go, don't you?" Or, "Don't you so want to drop that heavy gun?" At single's night, with the expectation of hooking up hot in the air, you could sleep with anyone you asked, but inevitably they'd regret it in the morning.

(5-6 dice) Make somebody violate their own fundamental core values. "Hey Mr. Homophobic Racist, wouldn't you like to make out with this handsome black dude while I film it?" You can also make somebody remember their answer for a long time if it isn't quite so extreme. Got a commitment-phobe boyfriend? Try "Would you marry me?"

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—People are puppets on strings. They hardly seem real, and sometimes, what pisses you off more than anything is when they give in and let you have your way. The contempt you have for them is awful—so it's easy to occasionally ask them something like, "Y'all want to beat the shit out of each other, don't you?" When you lose it, it's like that, and people become as real as carboard puppets with idiot grins of agreement, and so you ask them if they want to "stand there and take it" and see how many times you can drive your fist into their faces before their humanity reasserts itself.

Flight—Other times, it's easier to say "Can I outrun you?" No matter how cool and in-control this thing makes you, it still leaves you with a nasty whiff of self loathing. People are just wired like that, and there's no deluding yourself when you're doing when you put the whammy on somebody. When your stomach turns over with disgust, you want to just get the hell away, and when the power overtakes you, it's like being dropped into a well filled with fetid water, packed in with all the vacant-eyed people you'd mind-fucked. Flee your crimes, and flee your victims, but you'll never get out of that well.

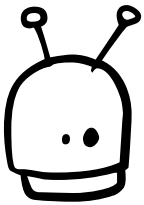
HOW DO I CHANGE?

It's weird, but the more you make people agree with you, the more you find yourself agreeing with others. Everyone smiles and says "Yes". It seems churlish to say no. You start agreeing with their tastes in music, with their choice for dinner, agreeing to give them some change if they ask for it on the street. The more you find your desires fulfilled by agreeable victims, the more you're willing to fulfil the desires of others—It's like "no" has been banished from your consciousness. People are defined by what they hate and reject as much as by what they welcome and love (more so, perhaps), and that hate—the ability to discriminate between what you want and what you don't want—is the core of you.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

Eventually, you can't tell the difference between what you and other people want anymore at all. You wander off into the Mad City and, with a grin, agree to *anything* asked of you. That big, agreeable smile you wear marks you out as the perfect sycophant, the perfect doer of terrible deeds. You'll kill anyone, destroy anything, commit any atrocity. With no will of your own anymore, you eventually gravitate around a strong personality, doing their bidding. You become the perfect ***Yes-Man***.

is for XENOPHILE;
what could that mean?
Ask the little men
whose skins are of green.



"If you want, I can show you the implant scars."

"What?!?"

"I said I CAN SHOW YOU THE IMPLANT SCARS!"

"It's too bright in the city to see the stars!"

"No… forget it."

It's really hard to talk to people in most clubs because the music is so loud. But I come to these places because they are noisy and there are lots of people. Crowds of people are usually safe, and so I stay with them. It has gotten harder, though, because sometimes even when there are lots of people around, I receive a Visitation.

When I turned around to the bar, I realized that this was one of those times when being around lots of people wasn't safe. On the next stool, one of the Reticulans was sipping a beer. They're the tall ones that almost look human, except for the six-fingered hands and being hermaphrodites, even the really sexy ones with the big tits who say "I wish to learn the ways of Earth-kissing." Boy, was I surprised about that. But all in all, I was glad it was a Reticulan. Once a Reptoid dropped in next to me while I was on the bus, and I had to tell an old lady that she was going to a Halloween party. I didn't realize until later that it was November. I lose so much time, I have trouble keeping track of things like holidays.

"Oh no, what's happening now? I can't have another anal probe because my diverticulitis is acting up."

"You don't have diverticulitis. You're a hypochondriac. The implants should keep you in perfect health. Do you think I can get a refill of these Earth-peanuts?"

"The implants have made me impotent, and I can't taste sour anymore!"

"That's all in your head. Our implants don't do that. The Rigelians use something different that might interfere with the taste centers of your primitive Earth-brain."

"What about the impotence?"

"Buy some Viagra. According to the coded packet-switching transmissions

we've intercepted, there are many suppliers of this Earth-drug available through your primitive Earth-internet."

"Stop saying everything is a primitive Earth-thing, and tell me what you want!"

"According to our instruments, you are about to experience a Grade-3 Reality Incursion Event, and we wanted to warn you."

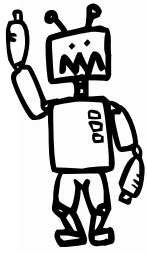
"What the hell is a..."

"Grade-3 Reality Incursion Event."

"Yeah."

"This one looks like what you Earthlings call a 'hum-dinger.' The walls will start to melt, and creatures from the Id will storm in and try and steal your guts, but this is psycho-surreal symbolism for them stealing your courage. According to our stochastic models, you'll need all your courage for the ordeals to come."

"Oh God, more monsters?"



"Yes. That's why I brought you this molecular deconjunctifier."

"... That's a ray gun?"

"Yes, a ray gun. Point this bit, pull this bit, and it makes other people's bits go explodey."

"I like the design anyhow. Really retro. Way better than that Reptoid thing that was all pulsing tubes and bone."

"Indeed. The Reptoids totally *suxxor*. Ah! Here's more delicious primitive Earth-peanuts!"

WHAT CAN I DO?

You've got a ray gun in your pocket, an implant in your brain, and when you whistle, the aliens float down in their gorgeous neon lit pimp-saucers and deliver a righteous anti-grav asskicking to anyone who annoys you or refuses to listen to you drone about your abduction experiences at them while riding public transporation.

You lost count of the abductions, the probes, the mornings of confusion as you wake, naked (yet again) in some random field (yet again) in the middle of a crop circle (yet again). All different kinds of aliens are extremely keen to explore your alimentary canal and fill your body with weird implants of unknown purpose.

You get a lot of drop-ins too. Walk down the street, and an alien might pop by with some cryptic advice or a useful bit of technology. A lot of times, it's some sort of ray gun (as least, that's what your primitive Earth-brain sees), but occasionally you get an alien toothbrush that turns out later to be just what you need to deal with the wigglies coming through the walls. Sometimes, you only remember in the heat of the moment about a Visitation and the advice or bric-a-brac they gave you—aliens do like messing with your memory.

The aliens make your life sort of crappy, but you can't deny that when the shit really hits the fan, they do sometimes swoop down in their saucers and lay down the blue-beam whammy.

(1-2 dice) Recall something one of your abductors said—a bit of cryptic advice that made no sense at the time. This remembrance might come with a token or bit of technology too—small, one-off devices.

(3-4 dice) Get a sweet piece of alien hardware—a jet pack or a big honkin' particle blaster. Perhaps something grosser and more pulsating from the Reptoids, or something even more alien from the Rigelians. Alternatively, an actual alien might come save your ass (which they'll happily probe later).

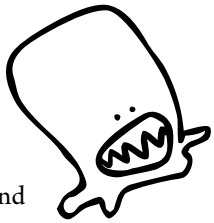
(5-6 dice) It's the goddamn mothership. Get sculpting on those mashed potatoes, because the Visitors are here, and they do not come in peace. You know the scene from *Independence Day* when the alien ships blew up all those landmarks, before that sort of thing started hitting a little too close to home? It's like that. A nuke from orbit, is after all, the only way to be sure.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—You've stared upwards, paralyzed, as Rigelian needles pierce your eyes. You've been paralyzed by countless blue beams. You've had implants secreted about your body. Your teeth pick up shortwave, but all you get is this angry Chinese kid. You've taken just about as much shit as it's humanly possible to take, and there's nothing for it but to goddamn unload on somebody. It helps if you're holding a thermic lance when you do it.

Flight—Old, panic-tuned reflexes kick in, possibly spurred along with adrenaline-stimulating implants. All the fear and helplessness come back in waves. But this time you're not paralyzed. This time you can run, run, run.

HOW DO I CHANGE?



It was almost better before the aliens started talking to you, back when it was just crazy dreams, unexplained blemishes, and missing time. Good old missing time. Now they don't blank your memories, so you remember it all in glorious Technicolor.

Before, when you attended Abductees Anonymous and spoke of your experiences, you got so much sympathy from the other confused, baffled people. Now they seem pathetic. The magic, the feeling of being special, all that is gone. Your capacity to be awed and amazed is burning out, leaving you dull, empty, dead-eyed. Monsters are supposed to stay under the bed, and aliens are supposed to stay in your dreams. Aliens stop seeming so alien when they're so damned commonplace. It's getting old and pretty frustrating.

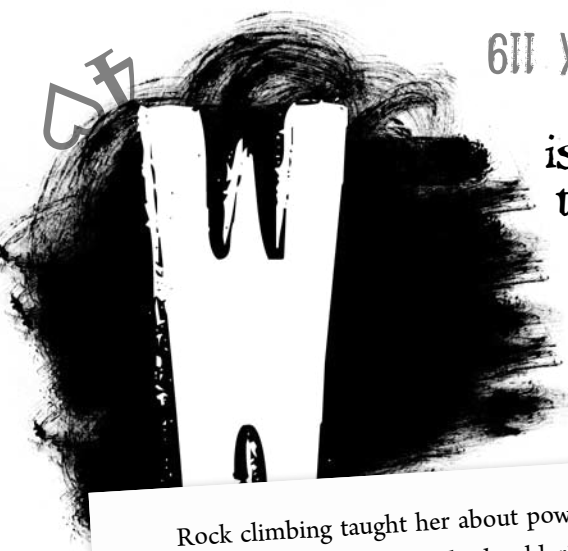
WHAT AM I BECOMING?

The old question never really goes away… *what if I'm just crazy?* No matter how prosaic and mundane it seems, there's a part of you that slices the thing thin with Occam's Razor—wouldn't that be the simplest explanation?

You haven't really been abducted by aliens, and you don't really fight evil specters in a twisted ur-city. Instead, you're strapped down somewhere, pumped full of drugs, and in all likelihood drooling.

Clearly you're crazy, but so is anyone around you that believes it's real too. And since you're not getting better even when you acknowledge the realities of the situation, it must be because they're feeding into your delusion. You clearly need to help them understand they're also insane. That it's time to take their pills, and go back to sleep.

Not that you're a shrink or psychologist, but back in the early days of the field, there was another name for those who struggled with terrifying human aberration, hunting them, studying them, and curing them. You've become an ***Alienist***.



is for WEIGHTS that pull it all down.

So make those things light; drop off that pound!

Rock climbing taught her about power-to-weight ratios. It was a buzzword mantra around the bouldering wall. The lanky, wide-shouldered boys would stretch for a new hold, and she'd watch them, envying their upper body strength as they tackled a bouldering problem that left their legs dangling. On the long, straight faces though, where you didn't brachiate like an orangutan, just held yourself close and ascended with leg strength, they got to envy her lower-body strength. Or perhaps, just stare at her ass.

Going up the side of a building wasn't all that different now—even one like this one, cocked crazy and crumbling. It was like a sandstone face, and even as warped as it was, there were still more holds than she'd have needed.

Power-to-Weight. By the Ratio, she was the strongest thing in the world right now, and reflexively jerked her weight up and down—lightening as she needed to ascend, creeping back up when the wind threatened to tear her off the building. Climbing up under her, the *things* weren't having as easy a time, but they still had plenty of power. The ratio loved them, just not as much as she could tease it and make it do tricks.

The flagpole was coming up. She didn't recognize the flag. Trying to make out the pattern of stripes and curves on it hurt her brain a little bit. But it was what she needed, so she stretched, letting her weight fall to nearly nothing, and pushed off in an eight foot back-arching reach for the pole's tip. She swung herself around and looked down—

—her head swimming, the inescapable demon of vertigo laughing at her for a second—and she spied the Watchmen still pursuing her, clockwork spider-legs splayed out and stabbing in the brickwork. So much closer than she'd thought!

But still too far for them—she smiled a cruel smile and squinted at them. How strong were they? *Power-to-Weight.* She doubled their second part of the Ratio, and they slowed. Doubled it again, and they stopped, barely keeping their place when the brickwork started to give under them.

Hell with them, I'm done, she thought, as she kept pushing their weight even when they tore free from the wall and fell away. She kept pushing and pushing, piling on the weight as they fell down into the twisted streets. When they landed, it sounded like a bomb, the whole building shook. A plume of dust rose up from the street.

She smiled. Gravity loved the last half of the ratio as much as it hated the first.

WHAT CAN I DO?

You can make things lighter and heavier. You don't know what it is you're really screwing with—inertia? Mass? Gravity? But you know what you can do. You can leap across the rooftops like a kung-fu superhero. Or make somebody's lunch so heavy, it rips right through them on its way towards the Earth's core. Kill a guy's weight and give him a good uppercut to the jaw, and he'll go slowly soaring skywards. Then dial his weight back up slowly, so he settles gently, or make him suddenly weigh fifty thousand pounds, and watch him plummet a hundred feet to go splatters.

It's funny though, when you think about it. You've always wanted to lose a little *weight*… perhaps a lot of it. Now that you can, it doesn't really address the real problem—how you look, how fundamentally you hate yourself.

(1-2 dice) Subtly mess with weight to deflect blows, distort the paths of bullets, and make someone clumsy and uncoordinated. Make yourself so light you can easily free-climb and can jump really far.

(3-4 dice) Easily incapacitate someone and cause really bad accidents. Perform 'superhuman feats of strength' that involve lifting great weights, or give your friends an unexpected boost—shave some pounds, and they can run farther faster, or lug bigger, nastier guns.

(5-6 dice) Make something utterly weightless or so heavy, it implodes like a gravitational collapse. There's also a metaphorical angle now—you can lend weight to your words, giving them so much gravity that they attract attention and crush arguments.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—Look at him! All hunched over, crushed, barely able to walk. Not so tough now. Raise your hand to slap him, and when it comes down it hits like a ten-pound sledgehammer. Gravity has your back, and nobody is going to argue with the Big G.

Flight—Physics in open rebellion, the laws of nature broken—when you flee from your crimes, your steps are lighter and lighter, you move faster and faster, and then over a wall and you're gone.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

You find you can't stop playing the carnival game with everyone and everything you see—guessing weights becomes an obsession. You cover your apartment with notes on the weight of every object (and how much the note adds to it). Your body image issues get ever worse as you obsess over carefully measuring everything you eat and excrete. You're constantly re-measuring everything in sight, because there's no telling if their weight may change without warning. If they do unexpectedly fluctuate, then your powers are running away with themselves.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

Everything must be cataloged. Objects like staplers, stuffed kitties, and snack chips are easy. They are inert, unchanging. But people… people are much more annoying. They never seem to weight the same one moment to the next. There is always statistics, if you must work in *averages*, but there's something about a branch of mathematics which caters to the fuzzy unreality of indeterminism that really pisses you off. What you find you must do, to get proper readings, is stabilize the weights of the people you measure, after first testing the extreme ranges, of course. This means your subjects must first be fattened, then starved, and then kept at a consistent weight under controlled conditions. But they need not worry—you're qualified to help them gain and lose the weight. You're a ***Weight-Loss Guru.***

is for VENTRILOQUIST throwing his voice.

Is what he says his or the damned Dummy's choice?

At this point, I think I should do the termite joke. It's a classic gag. I start off with, "How you feeling, buddy?"

Mr. Hickory says, "Oh, I been better."

"What's the problem, pal?"

"Got a terrible case of termites!"

"Oh haw haw, you blockhead."

See? Classic gag. Thing is, I just hate talking to myself. I can do it, but seeing myself from two sets of eyes, well, overlapping stereoscopic is disorienting enough without trying to organize two halves of the same conversation. Most of the time, I just slouch back while Mr. Hickory moves and talks. It's easier somehow--being him isn't like being me.

When I'm me, I feel heavy, my gut hangs out over my belt, I get headaches all the time, and I'm worried about that ache in my molar. But Mr. Hickory doesn't have any nerves or tendons or molars to bother him. I'm not sure why I can feel anything, but I can--but not too much, not like when I'm me. Like now, I know about the bullet that blew a ragged hole in my body, and about the stuffing hanging out my back. I know about the smooth handle of the carving knife, and that my little wooden feet are click-clacking on the bathroom tile. I know

I'm going really fast, but it all comes to me like I'm remembering it later, not like it's happening right now.

I remember catching a reflection of my regular body in the mirror, as it slumped out into the hallway, the bleeding meat-woman lunging at it from the closet. By the tub, Clay's got his .38 out and the crazy look in his eye. Then I went through the door and clipped the ragged, bloody thing about to chew my real face. A moment later, Clay shot me, and the moaning horror came all down in a pile on top of me. I wriggled out, and a wide branching hand hooked at me.

When I slashed with the knife, its fingers spattered to the tile around me. The thing started mewling and sputtering, and scrambled madly to stuff the fingers into its mouth with the bleeding ruin of its hands.

I turned on my little wooden feet to Clay. I was glad my painted wood face was carved into a wide smile.

"Hey Blockhead! Got a joke for you."

WHAT CAN I DO?

Some people can throw their voices, making them seem to come from somewhere else. You can do them one better—you can throw your mind.

Mr. Hickory is the classic model—big wooden head with garishly painted features and tiny tattered clothes. He's a Charlie Chaplin tramp, done as a creepy ventriloquist's dummy. Stick your hand up his shirt and wiggle the levers, and his mouth clacks open and closed, his eyes wink and roll. But you can do more than choke down some water while screeching in the dummy's voice—you can *be* the dummy.

The world through the beady glass eyes of a dummy takes on an especially lucid quality. Your senses aren't dull exactly, but information reaches your mind through stranger channels than nerves. Everything isn't futzed up by all that hormonal and limbic static. That reptilian clarity can be sort of addictive (it's clear why everybody thinks they're so creepy—every one, a little wooden sociopath).

As the dummy, you're scary fast—a blur in the corner of someone's eye. You're also stronger than anything that small and skinny has any right being. Combine that with sturdy wood construction, and you're damned near impossible to stop. Anything short of total incineration would just require some basic carpentry and grade-school art skill to repair. What's your human body good for, if not patching up the dummy?

5♢

5♡

(1-2 dice) Touch it, and project your mind into the dummy. While you're using it like a second body, your real body will collapse and be totally out of it until you return.

(3-4 dice) If you can see the dummy, split your awareness between your bodies. You can do a really impressive standup act or coordinate yourselves in a dangerous situation. Or focus all your attention on the dummy and let your meatsack go limp, and you can drive it to superhuman levels your power forcing its tiny wooden limbs to break steel doors and punch through engine blocks.

(5-6 dice) Act lucidly simultaneously in both bodies, even if in two entirely different locations, even if you can't see it. Or put everything you have into the dummy, and drive it to destruction—rip a tank apart, or run faster than a bullet.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—Every ventriloquist dummy is creepy. Everyone is afraid of what the dead-eyed, painted puppets might really like to do to them. Cock your wooden head to the side, laugh a hollow horrible laugh, get lost inside your dummy's skewed view on reality. Without a human body weighing you down, your sense of restraint—and of *guilt*—just doesn't weigh you down, leaving you free, able, and willing to do the most awful things.

Flight—You think you're in control and you've got a handle on the whole thing. But you turn and catch a reflection of your… NO!… *ITS* face! Your one mind stretched between two bodies reels and scrambles—a confusion of senses, perspectives, and the chaos of panic.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

Mr. Hickory looks up at you, and says "Just ask her out, already! I'm sick of this indecision!" It takes a little while to realize why—last time you were the dummy, not all of your mind made it back when you returned to your body. Bits of you stayed—unconscious voices and drives, wishes left unfulfilled, memories you wish you could forget. The dummy starts acting on its own in small ways, but as more of you gets stuck in him, it gains more and more autonomy, and you become more and more just a sketch of yourself. Eventually, one of your biggies is going to get stuck in Mr. Hickory—better hope it's your rage or hate, and not your lust. The jokes about "wood" will get old fast.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

Funny thing—Mr. Hickory is getting bigger. You don't realize quite how big until you look him in his glassy eyes, and realize you're not looking down to see him anymore—he's as tall as you. He's wearing your clothes. And before you can say anything, he cuts your throat with a carving knife. *It's always knives*, you think as your blood sprays across his painted, smiling face. The little wooden hands couldn't manage a gun, but holding a knife was easy enough. He holds you like a baby as you bleed out, and watches until you're gone. Then, he puts you down, clicks his stopwatch, and makes a mark in his notebook. There is so much to learn, so much to experiment on. He will study the uncanny valley where a familiar thing becomes a terrifying thing, and he'll master it, with your face his puppet. You're gone, replaced by a ***Slash-Test Dummy***.

is for UNDERGROUND,
down where trains run,
and tracks (your nerves),
hide deep from the sun.

TRACK MARKS

Track Marks is old slang for needle scars and blown veins, a junkie's stigmata marking arms and legs, inner thighs, until shooting junk into a rolled-back eyeball is the only way to get the sweet sweet shit into their system.

But for me track marks means something else, something much more literal, even if people think I've got the shakes from withdrawal instead of the rumble...

I feel the bone-deep thrumming up from the secret ways, the tunnels down where the unsleeping city smears into the waking world. You know, down where the sun never dares kiss the filthy naked stones, where the trains tear through the Earth—pushing, penetrating. I shake in sympathy with the Earth when those trains fuck her deep, and alright, people might have the right idea looking at me shake, 'cause the trains do get me high and get me off.

Feeling them rumble under me is one thing, but catching one, surfing on top, or slouching inside... that's the real shit.

And you've got friends there. You know—the sorts who ride the midnight express on a Tuesday, on a train that stops at First Street, and then at Central Circle, and then at Baphomet's Palace where there's a place you can pawn years off your life or happy memories, and another place you can get a falafel so good you'd kill a man for another one.

(I should know. I've done it all.)

But in the end I'll ride the train, just ride and watch, and more and more I don't care where I get off so long as I got an excuse to get back on, because stitched to my nerves is a map of the system, burned into my brain a timetable, and where I am don't matter, so long as I can get going somewhere else soon.

WHAT CAN I DO?

You make the trains run on time.

Underground, where the sun never looks, there isn't much difference between the City Slumbering and its Mad mirror. There are *things* down in the tunnels, things nobody wants to think about it while they wait on the well-lit platform. But they're there, in the dark, watching the little pools of light. They're there to prey on those who don't *get* the Underground the way you do.

You know the truth. All subways are the same subway. Imagine the tunnels running everywhere forever, as the midnight express rocks back and forth—ordinary

folks don't see it that way, but they're not your kind of Awake. Board in Brooklyn and arrive in St. Petersburg, with a changeover at a nameless station with tiled wall mosaics depicting the final fall of Man in uncanny detail, leaving in all that shit the Good Book edited out long ago.

You feel the rush and roar of the trains like signals in your nerves, and there on the Underground you've got a power few Awake possess. Do right by you, and travel through the Mad City has never been safer (not peril-free, dig—just *safer*). But put you in the wrong mood, and nobody is going anywhere on the subway. Put you in the *really* wrong mood and they're going *somewhere* all right...

(1-2 dice) Mess with the train schedule. Need a train right now? You got one. You can also remind certain Nightmares just what you control to make them back off.

(3-4 dice) Control the trains with your mind. Hop a train and go anywhere underground tracks run. Shut down, or dramatically enhance, the whole subway system. A show of power at this level can cause serious ripples in the cannibalistic hierarchy of the Mad City—the message, "Fuck with me, and I'll fuck with your whole damned city."

(5-6 dice) Make the train come to you—even so far as crashing through a wall and squishing someone you don't like, then ride it anywhere. Next stop Mars, followed by New York in the Year of our Lord 1776, and then back around to the wastelands of the 93rd century after the ants have taken over.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—The third rails hums in your brain, a tune of power and ferocious energy enslaved and forced to run a narrow track, drowning out all your kinder thoughts until all you hear is one long buzz. That power hates, rages, moans for release, for you to vent its fury. Someone's speaking to you, but you can't hear them, and you don't want to— one little push, and that asshole *burns*. Do it, and the rail hums contently for a little while. Pissing on the third rail is bad, but pissing off the third rail is worse. *Be the rail.*

Flight—The lure of the trains… just jump through the doors as they're squeezing shut, and you're gone. The tunnel mouths open, and the darkness is safety for you. Nothing down here can touch you—this is your private safe darkness. You wander into the black, get lost. The CHUDS will keep anyone from bugging you until you have your head together again. The trick is in wanting to go back.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

The trains connect everyone—the City Slumbering, the Mad City, and anywhere beyond if you look hard enough at the map. Connection becomes more relevant than cause and effect, that linear time, than any of the bullshit people care about Above. There is only interrelatedness without movement—the journey is an illusion, the train a figment of your imagination. All places are the same place, cause and effect and one, and your free will is meaningless. The only time you really feel like yourself, where you feel like you belong, is when you're on a moving train.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

The trains never get tired. But being in charge of where and when they go wears you down, makes you grey. Even still, the rhythm of the city keeps pounding into you. It would be easier, so much easier, to just set all that authority and control aside and step into a train, really *step into it*—become it—and ride the rails forever, never stopping. Not even when your passengers scream and cry and beat at your doors and windows. Not even when they starve to death and rot away, their ghosts staring hollowly out at the endless tunnels. It's not about the destination any more. It's about the journey—transit and transition… There's no telling when you'll arrive, which tracks you'll scream down, and not until you fail to stop will anyone know what horrible trouble they're in. You've become the ***Loco Motive***.

T is for TEDDY you
love more than life.

To shatter the world,
show him the knife.

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SEPIA LANCE

CLASSIFICATION TUNDRA-7

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-Begin Transcript-

FIRST VOICE [attrib. SSO Donovan]: So, we're supposed to find this homeless girl, take her teddy bear away from her, and then bring them both to the Milwaukee safe house?

[Sounds of motor-vehicle in operation]

[Ambient traffic noise]

SECOND VOICE [attrib. Senior SSO Mitchell]: That's the order.

DONOVAN: That's ridiculous. What do they think she has in the teddy bear? Is she a terrorist with a nuke or anthrax or something?

MITCHELL: No idea.

DONOVAN: You didn't ask?

MITCHELL: I asked for a threat assessment. According to the jacket, without the bear she's just an underfed runaway. Look for yourself. It's the blue one in my briefcase.

[Sound of locked briefcase being opened]

[Sound of papers shuffling]

DONOVAN: With it?

MITCHELL: The jacket makes the bear out to be some kind of WMD, but wasn't specific.

DONOVAN: Jesus [explicative deleted] Christ! And the two of us are supposed to tackle some junkie kid with a nuke-bear?

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MITCHELL: That's the order. It just said that under no circumstances were we to let her do anything to the bear like cut it or tear it. It was very specific about that. Separate her from the bear, and then transport them both separately.

[Time passes: 13 minutes 13 seconds]

MITCHELL: Hang on, check the picture. Is that her over there?

[Sound of motor vehicle engine accelerating]

DONOVAN: Hair's a different color, but... yeah, I see the bear poking out of her backpack.

MITCHELL: Alright, standard bag and grab. You hood her and hit her with the stun gun. I'll grab the bear. On my mark. Go, go, go!

-End Transcript-

Last known official record of Senior Special Situations Officer Wilson Mitchell and Special Situations Officer Paul Donovan. Mission log recording salvaged from wreckage of rented vehicle, linked through standard shell company to official budget line-item. Blue Jacket CASE SEPIA LANCE retains UNRECONCILED status.

WHAT CAN I DO?

You hold the universe hostage, in effigy. Its name is *Teddy*.

When you were three, Teddy was the whole world to you. No matter what, Teddy was there, warm and furry, ready to be squeezed. He'd soak up your tears when you cried. He'd listen while you told him every woe and wrong you'd suffered. Every girl should have someone who just listens, whose brown eyes were always full of sympathy, whose arms reached forever forward in an offered embrace. Even when you grew up and put away all your other childish things, Teddy came with you out into the big, scary, grown-up city.

Then there was that one night when the city went Mad, and things have never been right since. But no matter how messed up things get, Teddy is still the whole world to you.

Only now that's literal, and now the world is also Teddy. It's like with voodoo dolls and people—stick a pin in the doll, and somebody's leg hurts. But Teddy is so much more special. Twist Teddy's leg, and the subway crashes. Throw him to the ground, and the Earth shakes. Stab him with an ice-pick, and a plane crashes into a building. Tear out his stuffing, and everyone gets sick.

It breaks your heart to hurt Teddy like this.

But sometimes the world needs to hurt just as much as you do.

(1-2 dice) Cause some strictly localized mayhem. Hold a lighter under Teddy's paw to set the room on fire. Shake him, and throw everyone off their feet.

(3-4 dice) Spread chaos on a wider level. You can consume a whole building in flames by setting Teddy on fire, and stomping him out could level a city block. Or you could poison a lake by holding Teddy's head in bucket of ammonia.

(5-6 dice) Bring catastrophe and disaster on a massive scale. Pull out one of his eyes to cause a city-wide blackout. Rip off one of his legs to collapse a highway bridge.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—Look what they make you do to Teddy! Nobody understands the pain they make you cause to your best friend, and nobody understands the poor bear's sacrifices to keep you safe. You make sure, just this once, that they really know how much it makes Teddy hurt.

Flight—Sickening shame sometimes comes when you least expect it. You can't believe what you've done, what people have made you do, what they're going to make you do to. There's nothing left but to run away like a child, to hide under the bed until Mommy comes to make it all better. Except Mommy is never coming.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

One day, you hear a tiny voice, almost too low to low to understand, say, "*why do you hurt me*?" Teddy has found his voice at last, and it gets louder and louder until you can't ignore it anymore. Now when you cut him, he cries for hours afterwards, loud enough to hear even when stuffed to the very bottom of your backpack. The only thing that quiets him down is for you to *share* his hurt. At first, it just takes a little cut or burn to make Teddy quiet down. But each time it takes a little more, until you start to look and feel as ragged at poor, poor Teddy.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

You go too far one day, ripping Teddy open and yanking out too much of his stuffing. You here his rattling death-gasp, his tiny voice say, "*so… cold…*". Then amidst the doom and disaster you've brought, you do the same to yourself. But you don't die. From yours and Teddy's skin, you sew a new face for yourself—a blood-caked bear mask stitched to your skull. Your skin splits and bleeds when someone causes disaster in the Mad City, but their stink comes to your nostrils like the cloying sweetness of honey. No longer do you make the world bleed—now you hunt those who do, and you visit upon them in kind what they have done to the world. You burn them if they cause fire, you crush their bones if they break pavement, you bleed them if they rupture a water line. Your body is marked with the world's wounds. Your face, the glassy-eyed skin of Teddy. You've become the ***Grisly Bear***.

is for STIGMATA
dripping with gore.
Don't try to deny it.
You'll only bleed more.

Jack held me while I wept, and while I still hated him, I clung to him instead of pushing him back. His hands were hot on my back, the wetness transmitting the heat through my shirt. I could also feel that warm wetness on my face where it dripped down off his forehead, and under my arm where I squeezed him around the middle.

He shushed me and tried to hold my head, but I pushed him away. "Mother fucker! Why you? It should have been me! You don't believe in anything. It should have been me!"

"I know. It should have been you," he said, solemn and just this side of condescending.

"I come to this fucking place to try and get straight, and then meet you, and you don't even believe in Jesus or God or anything! Why are you even here?"

"I promised my dad…"

"Fuck your dad, and fuck you, you… " I probed the word with my tongue like a rotten tooth. "*Atheist*! How could you not believe after this? *You're fucking bleeding like Him*!"

He tried to reach out with his bloody hand, but I jerked back.

"I thought you *were* Him. I thought He'd come to forgive me when we were together in the woods. I thought it was *holy*, you asshole. I thought it was God making it holy."

"I liked you. I told you I had this medical condition…"

"Hemophilia? You've got bleeding wounds on hands and feet and forehead and side, and I saw how you marked Tommy with your blood. You know he had leukemia, right?"

He just kept looking at me with cool compassion, a sensitive reptile . "I know."

"He doesn't anymore."

"Yeah, I know that too."

"So how could you not believe? How can you not be Him?"

"Well, for one thing, I don't think Jesus was gay. Also, since I started bleeding, the shit I've seen…"

"What?"

"If God existed, and He let it all this go on unchecked, then He's a miserable sack of shit, that's why. It's easier not to believe in God than to believe He's a towering asshole."

He put his arms around me again, squeezing me hard, and I couldn't push him away. He just held me as I kept weeping, weeping for something I only now realized I'd lost—a feeling that the world somehow made sense. I used to wonder why there were no more miracles, like in the Bible. It's because miracles burn faith like acid.

WHAT CAN I DO?

You bear the Wounds of Christ—forehead scored by the crown of thorns, side punctured by the spear, hands and feet stabbed through by the spike, and back lashed raw by the scourge. The Extra Value Meal of Biblical torment.

Most of the time, they're like faint scars or freshly-healed scratches. But when you're upset, in danger, or just feel the need to call on it, the wounds open painlessly. The blood flows, and you end up looking like J.C.'s stunt double.

It doesn't matter whether you believe in Christ or not—the wounds are real either way. They're a thing of flesh and especially of blood, and your faith doesn't affect them one whit, but they tend to do strange things to other people's faiths. Especially when you use it to work miracles. Real, genuine miracles. The blood from your wounds can do all kinds of things, though all of them are suspiciously biblical and thematic. The blood on your feet lets you walk on water. The blood on your hands can cure the sick. The blood falling in your eyes shows you hidden things—spirits, demons, the vapors of madness leaking from a homeless person's ears.

But the blood's greatest power yet is one of *absolution*. Mark someone with the blood, and say you forgive them their trespasses and their sins are washed away and their consciousness freed. There are some who would torture and kill to know such relief. This absolution changes the world too—the family of a murder victim will forgive an absolved killer, the police won't pursue him, a prosecutor won't try him, a warden would let him free from prison. Absolved in this world and the next.

(1-2 dice) Work minor, subtle miracles affecting only one person in a significant but limited way. Cure an ailment, induce a crisis of conscience, or cause the invisible or the infernal to make itself know.

(3-4 dice) Perform dramatic and obvious miracles, including the big crowd-pleasers. Multiply food or transmute things. Walk on water, or summon really convincing angels to carry you through the air. You can even resurrect the dead. They seem *almost* okay—maybe they're a little off somehow, or perhaps that's just your imagination. But, there's something not quite right about them. You can keep bringing them back, but each time that oddness gets worse and worse.

(5-6 dice) Wipe someone's soul clean, leaving them as free from their guilt and the burden of their actions as a newborn child. The whole world forgives them too—mortal justice won't seek them out. Nothing need be rendered unto Caesar. They don't forget what they've done or who they are, just feel forgiven

of those wrongs. Of course, depending on who you absolve, they might not stop doing the horrible things they do. After all, they know a guy who can make it all go away, don't they?

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—There's no denying that sense of utter righteousness that comes over you when you've shown the wounds, a sense that those privileged to see the miracle should properly prostrate themselves before you. It's a dangerous feeling, because right behind it, when the respect fails to materialize, is the beast of wrath. Remember, Jesus threw down the scales and whipped the money changers from the temple. *You* can throw down *right here*.

Flight—Worse, though, is that other creeping feeling—that sense of being watched, being judged, being found grossly wanting. It's the feeling of your mom catching you masturbating in the bathroom, that fear of judgment and face-reddening shame hitting you like a fist. In those moments, there's nothing for it but run and hide your nakedness from God… whether or not you say you believe in Him.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

Eventually, you have to wonder—who *really* benefits from this power you have? You certainly do, in the short term, as do those you bless. But really, long term, who wins?

Those you help with the power, after the initial wonder fades, can't help but see the pragmatic utility. They see a fellow who can absolve sins and heal the physical consequences of them… no reason not to bag a hooker tonight, if you can get cleaned up tomorrow. One touch cures the sores on their junk and on their soul too.

No matter what other people do, just having these powers has got to make you question your own conviction. As these doubts cloud your mind, they'll pollute those around you as well. You'll cheapen the miracles with pragmatism and casual abuse. Resurrect a dead hamster, or turn one fish and chips with extra vinegar into two. Taking the long-view, you know who benefits? It has to be Satan… who you can't help but start to believe in.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

It doesn't really matter what you believed before—atheist or agnostic, Buddhist, even Christian. You've come to walk the Earth and bring salvation, except not for people this time. People had their chance, and they fucked it up. You're bringing a new sacrament of *wakefulness* to the nightmares of the world. Your blood will give them substance in the City Slumbering, and let them walk in it as easily as in their Mad City. You've become the ***Second Coming***.

is for RIBCAGE
with bars made of bone;
your heart is the jailer,
the bolt has been thrown.

WHAT CAN I DO?

Your body is a prison, and your heart is its Warden.

Your chest rips in two, bones cracking sternum splitting, and hinges open. Inside, your lungs and heart throb. Below, your guts twitch and squeeze. Take a deep breath, and your lungs expand and expand, sticking and tangling anyone unwary. You can hold them there, all stuck in your tissues like Br'er Rabbit. While it's pretty gross and disturbing, it can be a sort of protective custody—contrary to what you'd expect of your fragile innards, your expanded lungs are somehow nearly impossible to cut or escape from. You could engulf a friend in them to protect them from something, if you have the sort of friendship that'll survive a sudden assault by your insides.

If you want to take somebody in for questioning, then relax and exhale, and your lungs will suck the victim back into your chest. Your ribs will close with a wet convulsion, sealing him shut inside. The prisoner will wake to find himself in a distinctly Dickensian prison, where the guards are all pale and faceless. If he were forced to look closely, everything seems to have a particularly *organic* construction.

She kept smiling even after he'd thrown her down and shown her the knife. She kept smiling even when he slit her shirt open with the blade, and exposed her. They were usually sobbing and begging by this point, or just out of it, having retreated back into themselves. He'd picked her special, she had the body he liked, the hair, but looking at her smile, he got a sudden sense that maybe . . . maybe she'd *picked him.*

He took a step back from her, glancing around to see if someone was watching her back. Seeing nothing, he turned back to her . . . *as her chest split open* with a crunching, popping sound. Obscenities fought in his mouth, trying to be the first out, all his curses trying to escape him like rats off a sinking ship. Her ribs opened like cabinet doors. The clarity that comes before unconscious came to him, and he could see her insides—swelling lungs, clenching heart and other things . . . tubes and shimmering membranes, the hints of coiled looped guts below.

While he was staring, she inhaled sharply. Her lungs swelled and expanded impossibly, oddly reminding him of clowns with helium tanks and those long balloons. When the translucent membrane touched him, it stuck like flypaper to his hair and skin. His face was pressed into it, and it was like trying to breathe through a plastic bag. The shock of the sight wore off, and suffocating panic set in just before he blacked out.

He woke up on the floor, and it was warm and wet. There was the sound of dripping somewhere. He found himself wearing some kind of jumpsuit, striped a familiar pinkish purple. There was a dark, barred door at the end of the room. He walked to the bars, and saw they gleamed white—white like bone.

A booming voice called from the other side. "Ah, I see our newest inmate is awake. Jolly good! We have so many questions that need answering."

The door with the rib-bone bars opened, and a sound behind him made him leap forward into the new room. This one was lit blindingly from above, spotlighting a chair of bone and sinew, straps of tendon, seat of slatted vein and nerve.

Stepping into the light was the biggest man he'd ever seen, a solid, lumpy mass of muscle with a luridly red complexion and huge, almost convulsive breaths. This large man fingered the chair's heavy straps. "Come on lad, let's you and me have a heart-to-heart."

When you're done letting him languor in his cell, the Warden—a big blustery fellow, with a florid complexion and a body like a clenched fist—will come pay him a visit. No one is as good at getting to the *heart* of matters as the Warden. Those thrown into his custody tend to become much more tractable quite quickly. And if confession is required, he is exceptionally skilled at *extracting* what is needed. From your prisoners, the Warden can learn all kinds of things. All the while, you can close your eyes and watch as if through grainy sepia-toned surveillance monitors.

(1-2 dice) Entangle someone in your bloated throbbing membranes, to snare or defend them. While they're caught inside, all they can do is hopelessly struggle.

(3-4 dice) Suck someone back into your chest so they awaken in the prison. There, the Warden will do things to them. The Warden and your heart are the same, so he can't do anything to a prisoner that isn't in your heart to do… but oh, how surprised you might be when your heart is open and honest.

(5-6 dice) After the Warden has had one of his heart-to-hearts with a prisoner, you'll know everything there is to know about them. You can break them down and make them anew, or hollow them out and fill them with your heart's desire. When finally paroled, they'll be model citizens, so anxious to make reparations and help in any way they can.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—Your prisoners wouldn't be there if they hadn't done something wrong, would they? After all, they are prisoners. Look at this one, lying and carrying on about 'innocence' as if that word had any meaning. You feel the Warden hammering in your chest to get a crack at him. Why not let him do his job?

Flight—It's like grinning hard and wide to keep from throwing up, the mental tricks you have to do not to think about it. Your chest cracking, and then feeling someone tangled up in your lungs, struggling and writhing… but that's almost tame compared to the subtle sensations when they're in lockdown. Where the hell are they? They can't literally be caged inside your ribs, but sometimes you can feel them in there. What about riots? What about escape attempts? What about… oh… god… get them out! Get them out! The only thing you can do is expel everything inside of you in one violent burst as you're running away.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

From the first moment you use this horrible power, there's a little bit of you that's gone and is never coming back. It's easy to rationalize, at least at first. People do horrible things and they deal with it. They compartmentalize. Hit men have wives. Torturers have kids. But then there's that hideous glory you feel, that wrath. Your flesh catches the guilty and sees them rightly treated. The Warden burns with absolute certainty—that the scum have it coming. And he loves doing what he does for you, at least at first.

There're two paths for you here: either the creeping soul-sickness as wrongs pile on wrongs, and you can't justify to yourself anymore, more and more of you burns out. You're watching it on the monitors, but there's no denying that you're the one doing it. It's your tendons holding them to the chair. It's your nerves firing electricity into their testicles. So, you become sickened or deadened by it, and that leaves the Warden in a bad way. He's a creature of conviction—hard-hearted, certainly, but resolute. What becomes of him when your conviction breaks or your passion fails?

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

When your disgust with it or your indifference to it become too much for the Warden, he'll tender his resignation and vacate the premises. For you, this means a messy and painful final moment. For him, it leaves the question of "what am I to do?"

Having served and abandoned the cause of justice and law, there's nothing for him but to explore the other side. The former Warden takes to the streets, embracing the crimes and vices his prisoners were once guilty of, crimes and vices he knows so well from his many interrogations. He recalls working in your service and your ideals, and rebels against them violently. His whole nature is roiling emotion and drive, and his every thought now turned to crime and transgression. Your heart has escaped to become a ***Criminal of Passion***.

Q is for QUIET so deep and so hush that nothing makes noise when you tell it to shush.

He came at me slow, and never stopped smiling. There were no shoes on his feet, just thick hiking socks.

"Sir! You need to stop right now! Take another step and I'm authorized to use force!" Textbook, just like in the training videos you have to watch before being allowed out to guard real bodies.

He smiled and put his finger to his lips. It felt like a cold fist closed around my throat, and I reached up to feel if it was real. I couldn't speak. I could breathe fine, but I couldn't make a single damned sound.

I panicked and drew my sidearm on him. He cocked his head to the side, tapped his ear, and kept on coming. My boots clacked loud in the hospital halls as I took a step back, and he mimed a wince as though I'd made a terrible noise, and hurt his ears.

That's when my foot wouldn't move quickly anymore. It felt like I was wading through tar. At that point, I just lost it. I know they pay me to keep my head when things go to shit, but this was too much. I started squeezing the trigger on my Glock, but nothing happened. I tried to work the slide, but it was frozen in place. I tried to throw the gun at the smiling guy, and it stuck to my hand like it was glued there.

He kept on walking. As he went by me, I made to grab him, but when my hand should have slapped against his chest, it slowed, stuck in the same tarry drag as my feet. He moseyed on into the room where Mr. Simkin was laid out, all hooked up to machines and tubes.

The thin smiling guy pulled up the chair next to him, and gave him a gentle shake. My boss opened his eyes, and looked at the faintly smiling newcomer. "Son?"

The smiling man nodded, "I'm finally going to listen to you, Dad. And you don't even have to burn me this time."

He laid his ear on the old man's chest, as if to hear his heartbeat. Every monitor in the room started to flash and blink, but none of them made a sound, not a damned sound. Then they all went dark. The old man shook for a moment, and then, was still.

WHAT CAN I DO?

You can make people be quiet. Anything you could hear, you can silence by preventing an action or event that could cause noise. You can force people to move slowly and carefully, and there's just no way to fire a gun quietly.

The louder the sound, the easier it is for you to make things still. Heavy boot steps on a tile floor would be easy to silence, forcing the walker to tiptoe through invisible syrup, but creeping around in thick socks would be really hard to hush.

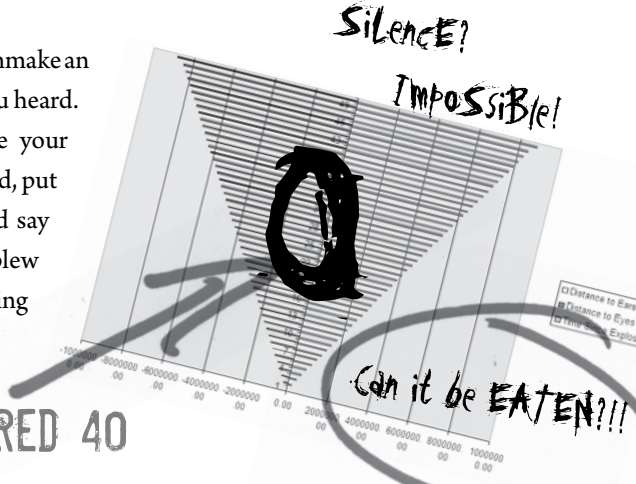
It raises some interesting questions when you consider silencing something moving faster than it's own sound—a hypersonic jet, for example—or something you see happening before you hear it happening—thunder following the lightning. Which isn't to say that this is impossible. Sound follows action, and your power slows or stops action to prevent sound… but with a dramatic effort, you can follow the waves of sound backwards, eating ice cream out of the event's light-cone (the one you read about in your astrophysics textbook), and hushing it anyway.

Yanking a kink into spacetime this way leaves you with head-swim like a bad inner ear infection, and weirder, two sets of contradictory memories. In one, you saw the lightning flash and then heard it, and in the other you saw and heard *nothing* because the noise-making event never happened. A retro-hush effects all observers this way, but the further back the event is along the *y*-axis of time and the *x*-axis of space, the harder it's going to be to silence and the more it's going to screw up everyone's brain if you do it anyway.

(1-2 dice) Hush up obvious and immediate noise-makers, anticipating them before they happen. Silence a scream, prevent a gun from firing, and if you can hear it, stop someone from breathing so loud.

(3-4 dice) Spread out in your immediate area, and within your hearing, stop everything that makes noise, creating a zone of stillness and care around you which follows your careful tread.

(5-6 dice) Reach back in time and unmake an event which caused noise you heard. In the last moments before your consciousness is extinguished, put fingers to imaginary lips and say "shhhhh" to the bomb that blew your apartment into a smoking ruin.



HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—SHUT THE FUCK UP! Making noise is a crime and a moral failing, and how dare these assholes keep squeezing their useless triggers or chewing at the screams backing up in their mouths and trying to force them out?

Flight—Everything makes noise. Everything. Buzzing cell phones, dripping coffee pots, and all the mindless, mewing babble people relentlessly force into the world. It all pollutes the air, and you have to get the hell away—but get away quietly.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

"He seemed so normal. He never stood out. *Quiet*, you know?" Yeah, it's the quiet ones you have to watch out for. Sounds of all kinds grate at your nerves. First, only the jangly discord of keys or a midnight dog bark make you wince, but later even melodious sounds are knives in your ears. You start to lay the stillness on things just because you can't stand to hear them. You start taking obsessive care never to make sound yourself, and the noises made by others become an affront to you.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

You make them be quiet, but they keep trying to make noise. You do it again, and *they keep trying to make noise*! Your power is a miracle, isn't it? You know what you do shouldn't be possible, but you can do it, so it has to be a miracle. Clearly God wants it to be silent. He wants all his creation to shut up and listen for fucking second, but they never do. Worse, they build all this noisy tat to make more and more sound, until the cacophony drowns out all thought. What do you do to infidels who refuse your silent salvation over and over? How long do you forgive before you must *act*?

You're done offering the forgiving stillness, and now your presence is met with the absolute abating of all sound, as you ensure that anyone you face will never again make even the tiniest peep. You craft your armor from frozen air, molecules rendered absolutely still, permitting no vibration to pass through its impossible density. You forge your sword from stilled screams—a standing wave of sound rolled back on itself, never leaking out to the ears of the heathens you persecute. Your God is silent, having spoken His whole piece in seven days, and so you fight a crusade for piety towards this ideal. You've become the ***Silent Knight***.

is for PAST, ahead of today; an old man at supper, tomorrow, a babe.

"Kid, you see a guy come through here? About my height, dark haired, dark skin?"

"No."

"You sure? He would have just come through that door. He's dangerous."

"Yeah? What he do?"

"He killed a couple of guys."

"You a cop?"

"I look like a cop?"

"You look like a Goodfella wannabe."

"Watch it kid! You're old enough to get a pop in the mouth."

"Man, hold your horses. I think he went through that door behind you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Get your ass clear, kid. He's got a gun, and it might get ugly."

"Don't it worry you none?"

"What?"

"Turning your back on somebody like me."

"What's a kid going to do? Just keep out of the way when the shooting starts."

"Start like this you mean? Reach for the sky, Mario!"

WHAT CAN I DO?

You can fast-forward or rewind your life, getting older, getting younger. Your whole life, cradle to grave, is right now.

It's so easy, it's almost a party trick—go into the closet a man, walk out a boy. And there's plenty of benefits—being able to sneak around and look different being only the most obvious. When you were a young man, your muscles were solid, you healed fast, and your dick was always hard when you wanted a second roll in the hay. You didn't appreciate any of it then, of course, but now you can. As you grow older, you finally get a handle on yourself for the most part, and your body becomes familiar. Your brain runs things more often and the hormones are tempered by age.

When you push it harder, things get weird though. When you're 45, you go to a shooting range with some guys from the office, and you spend two hundred dollars on ammo so you can blaze away for thirty seconds with a machinegun. You can become that 45 year-old you *right now* and be holding that big locked and loaded machinegun *right now*.

Becoming who you were at a specific moment in your past is easier, because you can remember it. Becoming who you're going to be is a little trickier and a little hit or miss. Pick a random time frame: the you who will exist in five years, three days, and seven hours will be wearing a hula skirt and be covered in someone else's blood. The you in ten years, four days, three hours will have a bad mustache and a briefcase with fifty grand of freshly minted bills in it (hope nobody checks the dates if you try and spend the cash in the now).

(1-2 dice) Shift your body along your timeline. You got shot a few minutes ago, but last week you were fine. Eventually, you'll have to be the now-you again and heal up, but that can wait until you're hell and gone from here.

(3-4 dice) Move your mind along the timeline as well. This is really useful when you want to find out if something you're about to do is the right thing. Is this dog dangerous? Think ahead to the you of ten minutes in the future and count your future fingers. This raises some troubling questions—what happens to all the you's that get unmade when you do something different? Oh… don't think about it! Don't think about how *pissed off* they all must be.

(5-6 dice) Bend your timeline into a circle, ouroboros up, and swallow your tail. Shift quicksilver through your whole life and back again, cycling and unbroken. Know everything in this one moment that you will ever know. Be everything that you will ever be. Be and know everything you could possibly have been

and known. You smear yourself across the quantum spectra of possibility until you take action or make a decision (which is the right action or decision—it can't not be), then collapse your wave back into a particular you. Walk into the casino of your choice, put a grand down on 33 Red, and let them spin the wheel—you're the you out of every possible you that wins ten times in a row and doesn't get murdered by the mob afterwards.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—You never know what you're going to get. It's hard to remember what you were feeling at any given point—and there's no telling what you'll be feeling in the future. Worse, there's no telling how that state of mind is going to deal with whatever horrible thing is happening right now. There's plenty of you's to go around, and a lot of them are nursing grudges or secret hurts you haven't even lived yet. When they get yanked out of their lives and into your present, the first thing they want to do is *lash out.* Today's friend might be tomorrow's foe, and a worthy target for future-you's rage.

Flight—Other times, the you that you shifted to is thrown into a hellish situation that you still have nightmares about, or some future that you can't even fathom. Either way, *one of you* just loses your shit and runs. And in those moments, it can be hard to remember who—and *when*—you are.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

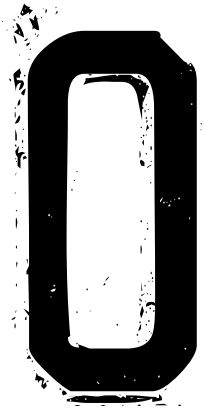
It's getting where you're having trouble remembering who you're supposed to be right now. It helps if you take a picture of yourself every morning so you have something to hold up to the mirror and compare. Keeping an obsessively detailed journal also helps for checking your memories. Notice some missing entries, and you're a future-you. See some stuff you don't remember writing, and you're a past-you (or you're a late stage alcoholic—or both). Keeping track of the date becomes compulsive, as does checking the time on your watch. You live in constant fear that you'll turn out not to be real—either a ghost of the past living borrowed time, or a shadow of the future waiting to be unmade by different choices in the present.

Where things get positively fucked up is when you realize the date isn't the date it should be, and that the you that you think is the *now-you* is actually the you from somewhen else, and the you from now is just using you to get something done, and when he's gotten what he wants, he's sending you back to whenever—or worse, to the

oblivion where all time-looped non-people go when their timelines get snipped off. You'd swear you weren't such an asshole when you were the you back then.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

Eventually, you're not going to be able to tell the difference between past and future anymore—it's all smeared together into one horrible confusing blob of now. Your appearance is a swirling blend of past and future, and you grow hungry. So hungry for just a bit of linear experience and rationality, some cause and effect. People have that—they live lives front to back, and it all makes sense to them. If you take those people and consume them, their linear lives will give yours some direction… at least, before they're worn down to nothing. People with long lives ahead of them work best, like little children with so much life to live. You've become a ***Cradle Robber***.



is for ORPHEUS
who walked down to hell.

If you know the way,
you can do so as well.

I left my wooden friend in the kitchen, and followed the footprints from the basement door to the stairs. They were scorched right through the carpet, curls of smoke making signs and portents above them, little laughing faces. Up the stairs, each one burned with a footprint. I could make out the individual toes scorched in the wood.

When I reached the top, I heard gasping sobs, like somebody trying to weep after sprinting a hundred yards. The footprints went down the hall and into the bathroom. The door was half-closed. I slowly pushed it open.

Clay was sitting on the edge of the tub, feet in the water. The knob was turned all the way to cold, but the water in the tub was steaming. He heaved with each breathless sob, and the embarrassment I felt then, seeing another guy crying, was hard to bear. I tried to find words, but only one was there when I reached. "Dude..."

"I walked down there, man. I walked all the way down there with her song playing on my headphones. They threw up walls on the road, but my feet know the shortcuts, and I kept on going even when my feet started smoking."

I just stood there silently, letting him speak.

"And I found her! I fucking... I fucking *found her*. You know why the road is paved with good intentions? Because they let you decide what happens to you down there. It's just a mirror for what you think you have coming. And they had her in a... she... it wasn't her anymore."

A sound crept into my ears, scuttling from under the bathroom closet door. It sounded like a mewing. A *wet* mewing.

"That place also simplifies you, you know? Strips out anything irrelevant, leaves you alone with your true self. Who wouldn't go fucking crazy after that?"

The closet door wasn't quite closed. It started to shake, like an unsteady hand was placed against it.

"And you know all her problems with food and her body and shit. She'd really gotten better. She really had. Then..."

Something curled around the edge of the door.

He let out a deep sigh as it emerged. "What happened to her mom was fucked up. Anybody would have been thinking about opening a vein after that."

The thing had more than just fingers. It had *stumps* of fingers, like fingers had been bitten off! Between the stumps, like branches growing on a pruned tree, new ones had sprouted only to be bitten off in turn.

"You need to understand it wasn't her fault, alright? You need to understand none of this was her fault, but suicide means something to a Catholic. So I walked down and carried her back. She tried to fight me and run back to it. Can you believe that? She tried to run back to the eating and purging and eating and..."

The door squeaked as it opened. It had to, right? Isn't that how these things always have to happen? Part of my brain sneered at the horror movie cliche. Another part knew this was all too fucking real.

He turned around and looked at me through the hair plastered to his face, and I saw the bleeding tatter of his left ear.

"She's got to eat, bro. And if it isn't somebody else, it'll be her, and then she might as well still be down there, right? You got to understand bro, it isn't her fault."

Light from the fluorescents over the sink showed me something like *teeth in meat*. A face like raw hamburger with piranha jaws, wet, inuhuman, but still smiling, and I realize she's not moaning and crying in pain, she's moaning in anticipation.

"I'm going to walk back when I get my head together a little and try and find the rest of her, but until then..."

Like he said, *she's got to eat.*

WHAT CAN I DO?

Like Orpheus, you can walk to Hell and then walk back.

The problem is, Hell is a funny sort of a place. It borders on every city and every town, and you can use it as a shortcut to get somewhere mundane, but think about that for a second—you're walking through *Hell* to save on *travel time*.

Sometimes, it rings true with the stories of fire and brimstone—like when it was a rusting industrial wasteland, where furnaces belched clouds of sooty smoke, and everything was greased with a thin layer of half-burned human fat. Other times, the place is more abstract and allegorical. Once, it was row upon uncountable row of clinically clean white pods, each containing one writhing person with a finger thick cable plugged into the base of their shaved skulls. There're demons, of course, but they too are ever-changing. One day, they're snarling beasts sprung from Medieval woodcuts. Another, they're nebbish bureaucrats just pushing paper and doing their jobs.

You can find all sort of people in Hell. There's sometimes no rhyme or reason to who's down there and why. Some are blameless, suffering damnation for an arbitrary cultural reason. Some ran afoul of their own beliefs in ways they themselves couldn't forgive. Others are clearly monsters who deserve their fate. If nobody is looking, you can sometimes sneak people back up with you.

There's a *Hell* of a price, though. You're a known quantity in Hell. Demons know you by name, and if you think for a moment, you can recall theirs. Hell marks you by the ash in your tread and the look in your eye, and that look… because of it, there's few who can meet your gaze.

(1-2 dice) Sidle down one of the hidden ways where Hell impinges to find a shortcut past a guard or through an unlocked door. You don't descend more than a step or two, but you can still hear and smell Hell.

(3-4 dice) Saunter through Sheol to speak with the damned. Duck through the hellish suburbs to wander amongst them, and you'll see terrible horrible, forbidden things. The damned are a pretty chatty lot, when they have tongues. Emerge wherever you like—you can even use it as a shortcut to get from one place on Earth to another, if you're willing to walk down Pandemonium Boulevard.

(5-6 dice) Fling yourself into Hell's teeth, sprinting full-out downward, faster and harder right into the heart—where it is timeless and eternal, bordering on all places and all times—to emerge anywhen. Go back to your enemy's childhood and push them in front of a bus. Or grab somebody or something from Hell's grasp, and drag it back out with you. Hell is greedy and jealous. Run like the Devil's biting your ass, because he's about to.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—Sometimes you bring something back with you, a little spark of infernal wrath. or perhaps walking the sands of Hell and ignoring the screams of the damned has just turned you into a callous asshole. All the pain you've seen and been unable to stop… well, perhaps the demons have something good going on, and you ought to try inflicting a little pain of your own.

Flight—When you least expect it, something will remind you of Hell. For a moment, you flash back to the sulfur and screaming, and you can't see any way out. But that won't stop you from running—he who hesitates in Hell is truly lost.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

There is no sun in Hell, but sometimes the whole sky burns like one, blinding, and no matter how much you squint grit always blows into your eyes. The things you see during your descents are more and more writ upon your face. Your breath huffs out in a sulfurous cloud. Your feet smolder in your boots. The look in your eyes, it's a mile beyond a 'haunted look'. People stop treating you like a regular person, and start warily edging around you. Nobody will meet your gaze (and if they do, you know they're not really people). All the pain and misery you see around you on Earth is as nothing compared to the vast horrors you've seen Below. The world is less and less real, life more and more pointless.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

One day, Hell will follow you home. Your haunted tread leaves footprints, and the damned and damning creep after you. Disaster comes in your wake, and you are the storm crow, the unwelcome stranger, the plague bearer. Every step you take leaves a print in both worlds, and Earth and Hell are as one. From the path you walk, demons rise, insane specters dance, and Hell bleeds out into the world. At your heels, fire. You've become the ***Tinder-Foot***.

is for NINJA with
mad ninja skillz.

There's
always
some more
if they get
themselves
killed.

I DON'T EVEN LIKE ACTION MOVIES!

That thought rocked around in her brain, shoving everything else, crazy or rational, aside.

I DON'T EVEN LIKE ACTION MOVIES!

The ninjas just kept coming—through the broken windows, out of the kitchen, from behind the sputtering juke box someone had impaled with a broken pool cue. The stranger who'd grabbed her, spun her around at the bar and called her a 'fucking bitch!' like he knew her was dead in seconds. A dozen little star-shaped knives imbedded in his spine and the back of his head, and she almost remembered the sounds they made—like a hard-hit ping-pong ball—but the thought came back around…

I DON'T EVEN LIKE ACTION MOVIES!

Anyone else who tried to fight back got similar treatment, with swords or sticks or little spiked balls. The air was acidic with smoke bombs, and the scent of blood that almost reminded her of shaving her legs with a bad razor, but…

I DON'T EVEN LIKE ACTION MOVIES!

The floor was littered with dead Ninjas too—they seemed so easy to kill. A punch, and they went down with necks all twisted. A kick, and they folded up. One had been almost decapitated when a bottle had broken across his masked face. Yet there were more and more. When they finally slew the last of the bikers, they bowed stiffly to her, and gathered their fallen, and vanished in long silent leaps into the night, like they never were.

WHAT CAN I DO?

You are the master of all the ninjas in the world. *All of them.* You don't know how it happened, but whether or not you want to or mean to, you call to them in your hour of need.

One day, the ninjas turned up on your doorstep, kneeling as they always did in the films before their master, silently awaiting your orders. They might be fragile, but unless they're fighting a real honest-to-Mifune samurai, they do pretty well. Silent, deadly, and waiting to leap into action—your own private army of ninja mooks. As they say, there're always more ninjas.

They are the prototypical enemy hoard—faceless, interchangeable, and unique only in their ninjarific armament. Against a proper samurai badass they don't stand a chance. They attack in carefully coordinated waves of one and two, only to be decapitated by a full-moon cut or gutted by the rising swallows stroke. But really—where would one even find a proper samurai badass anymore? Without these blood-soaked heroes, the ninjas just pile up. There's always more ninjas, and like rabbits, they reproduce out of control without their natural predators to reduce their numbers.

Just think how popular they were in the 80's, and how now they're sort of lame and funny. People like pirates more. *Pirates*! Galoots who say "Arrrrh" all the time and have not even a single throwing star or pair of nunchucks. Makes you sick to think about it.

(1-2 dice) A small cadre of ninjas spring to your service. They'll absorb blows meant for you and strike your baffled enemies, or silently leap off on missions of espionage and report back with concise reports—written in inked brush-strokes on little rolls of rice paper.

(3-4 dice) Stage a ninja assault, laying waste to a whole floor of accountants in cubicles or storming the stage at a competitive pie-eating contest to steal the trophy. The power of their numbers is staggering. Even when most of them are being pummeled, you can get away since the heroic types are busy doing the pummeling.

(5-6 dice) Call forth so many ninja that even Zatoichi would have trouble. They come swarming out of every possible hiding place like clowns from a tiny car. Their weapons are exotic and bizarre. Slaying silently and without mercy, they are heedless of their own, ridiculously fragile lives. Alternatively, you can call a single Ninja to serve you. They say the number of ninja is in inversely proportional to the competence of any single ninja, so this one will be pretty impressive. His ninja costume will be a different color, showing that he stands apart from his easily-felled brethren. Red Ninja has mastery of explosives. Blue Ninja can swim with grace and hold his breath for an hour. Green Ninja can disguise himself as a plant. Gold Ninja can dance better than John Travolta.

HOW DOES IT BREAK ME?

Fight—It's what ninjas do best, other than dying. You don't even need to shout orders—obedient servants know their master's mind. And their master is angry, a vengeful god-king. Blood will be spilled for even the slightest offenses.

Flight—Sensing danger to your august person, the ninjas sweep you up and leap for safety, carrying you along while their fellows die honorably covering your retreat. Even if you'd prefer to stay, the ninjas know you must flee. You can only hope and pray that where they leave you won't be the Jade Mountain of Ten Thousand Tortures like last time.

HOW DO I CHANGE?

Increasingly, you rely on the ninjas to handle trivial every-day issues along with major threats and menaces. You have them taking out the trash, scrubbing the toilet, walking the dog, and painting your house. They resent this dishonorable work, but would never refuse an order, and seeing them so used will make you question their value. Inevitably, one is accidentally get impaled on the rake while doing lawn work; another falls into the wood chipper. Your contempt for them grows alongside their dissatisfaction with your leadership. More and more, it inspires treachery.

WHAT AM I BECOMING?

When the ninjas finally turn on you, you're ready. You've watched them, learned their tricks. It's been mind-numbing—like watching a TV channel playing bad martial arts movies 24/7…

They come for you, piling on. The sword you claim from the body of the first to fall flashes; heads leave shoulders, coating the room in an arterial spray. But there are too many of them, just *too many*, and they keep coming, each one stronger and deadlier than the last. But you have one last trick. You throw the tiny glass globe to the ground, releasing a puff of smoke, and you're gone—nowhere to be seen.

Problem is, you *stay* that way, even when you don't want to. Wrapped in the clothes and bathed in the blood of a ninja, you're untouchable and *invisible,* permanently.

Invisible—and *deadly*. Folks throughout the Mad City speak of you in hushed tones, afraid you're nearby, afraid you'll kill again—for that's the only way you can really ever touch the world now, making your victims disappear at the edge of your blade. You've become the ***Vanishing Act***.

Madness is
the Method

MADNESS IS THE METHOD

By hook . . . or by crook

The power and the coolness of Madness Talents is just the worm on the hook, my little fishy. The hook is what happens when you roll the only six on the table, and it's red. It's pretty easy to milk a super-power for cool play, but how do you work flipping out so it doesn't get samey, doesn't lose its punch, doesn't make your character seem weak?

LOSING YOUR SHIT

When Madness dominates, you check off a Response, then just run away or kick ass, right? Sure, but it doesn't have to be that simple. Wrecking stuff and breaking bones is one thing, but what about social violence? Wrecking relationships and breaking hearts. There's the rage that explodes and breaks a chair across someone's face, and there's the rage that simmers, stockpiling of weapons and planning to blow up the school. *Don't Rest Your Head*'s narrative structure and flexible scene and conflict framing give you a lot of leeway when handling madness and its complicated manifestations.

FLIPPING OUT WITH STYLE

Screen time and Responses

What a checked Response gets you is *mandated* spotlight. Whether you've won or lost the conflict doesn't matter, and your little block of play isn't over because Madness dominated, and so now you've got to do something—something that's going to make things more complicated.

One issue with a Madness-driven action is whether it constitutes another conflict or acts as a narrative 'bridge'—carrying you to the next scene, where you'll be picking up the pieces or dealing with the fallout. There're merits to both ways way of tackling the Response. Much will depend on scene and session pacing, and just how badly you want to push for your goals.

If the Response acts as a bridge, climax, or dénouement, then it's best served with narration only—especially if there's nothing remaining on the table that you want. Some conflicts when lost are *lost*—there's just nothing left to salvage. The guy you're

trying to talk down eats a bullet instead of dropping the gun. The portal to Hell closes before your sister's soul can escape. The music swells, crescendo, and then drops with finality… but the scene doesn't fade. Your hands clench, your teeth show through a chimp-grin, and the music comes back up—screeching and clawing, wavering violently, it carries chaos. Your eyes flash wide and… *boom*. What follows happens with finality beyond what the dice might tell as you unleash fury or thrash to escape. Because there's nothing left in contention, the Response hits like fallout raining down, poisoned ash that covers the scene with the taint of your loss of control.

If, instead, you ride the Response into another conflict, or another exchange in a complicated scene, then you'll be throwing dice under the influence of Fight or Flight. The trick here then is to figure out how the sudden and gut-deep drives to Fight or Flee mesh with your other goals in the scene, and whether they're at all compatible. Keep in mind that acting in Response doesn't mean you have to literally throw a punch or run away. You just need to figure out how the rage or panic is going to manifest in conjunction with whatever else you're trying to do.

HERE I COME . . . TO RUN AWAY?

You reach the apartment where they're holding your wife, and getting past the guys guarding the door meant you had to throw down a fat pile of Madness dice, winning out, but suffering under its dominance. The shattered door explodes inwards, and seeing the *things* clutching your wife is too much—the animal urge to flee hits hard.

How do you resolve this with your goals in the scene? Does the Response totally hose your intents? Do you have to run away, and hide under the stairs? *Hell* no!

Keep in mind that when Madness dominates it represents your loss of control *making things more complicated*, not making you look like a lame-ass.

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN . . .

You scream, close your eyes tight and charge straight at your wife, arms thrown wide. Dice are rolled. Success! You plow into her, and both of you burst out through the window into glorious windy escape, leaving the horrors behind—but *you* rapidly approaching the ground below. You warped your goals and intents through the mad lens, applying Flight, and then resolving normally. And keeping with Flight, you win out, but damn, are things more complicated now.

REVENGE IS A DISH BEST SERVED WITH CHIPOLTE MAYO

Screwing with Time

Don't Rest Your Head really lends itself to nonlinear play, with flashbacks covering how much of a character's back story arrives in active play. But what about flash *forwards*?

Rather than resolving the Response within the context of the current scene, if the pacing and flow allows it, try running a fast, nested scene within the current one, where you suffer the Response at some later time. Just a flash, an image, or a snapshot of a scene to come.

This marks something down in your future that will be coming, and the GM can use it to foreshadow, drop red herrings, or present you with a sense of looming doom. If you shunt your Response into the future this way, the GM is encouraged to be a complete bastard about it. If things are running really hot, and you just don't want to sideline things with a mad bout of violence or flight, then check the Response and segue into the next scene while the GM describes a haunting flash of impressions—a cleaver, a severed hand, a scream.

Sometimes, tagging a Response will mess you up in a pretty major way—*permanently* even. The wrongs which left you that ragged and raw can't be forgotten, and down the line they're going to come back hard and horrible, PTSD style, and you'll find yourself Ramboing a whole department of cops or diving down a sewer grate to avoid a red-haired woman. Or you'll see a face in a crowd years later—one things follows another, and then you're standing in their room while they sleep with a blue-steeled .45 in one hand, and a pillow to push into their face in the other. The metallic ring of the gun's action is louder than the shots fired through the goose down, and the air is filled with feathers and the smell of burned cotton.

THESE FISTS WERE MADE FOR TALKING

What does 'Fight' mean?

Does hitting a Fight Response always mean leaping bodily on a hated person and gnawing the soft tissues off their face? Is it always a *physical* thing?

Raw physicality can push the action to a really intense place—boring into the heart of fear and frenzy—invoking the specter of future regret. But an emotional outburst, screamed abuse, hateful words—between two people with a powerful bond, sometimes a rage-filled statement is more hurtful and violent than a punch in

the face. And often more damaging in the long-term, more complicated, longer to heal than a bruise or broken bone.

So consider the context when you suffer a Fight Response. Amidst peril and violence, unleashing the physical animal is appropriate, but if the situation is currently calm, consider other forms of fighting.

But whatever you do, play it from the gut. Fight (and Flight, for that matter) are deep, bestial, *irrational* urges, and an element of the wild animal should always be present in such a moment. As a rat trapped in the maze of the Mad City, Fight Responses are those moments when you're *cornered.* Make 'em feel it.

ZEN AND THE ART OF HAULING ASS

What does 'Flight' mean?

Does hitting a Flight Response always mean screaming and running, shaking and groaning with fear? It really means *avoidance*, evasion, escape. Like with Fight, it doesn't have to always be physical.

Screeching and running away… it's *undignified*. Lots of players would rather that their characters lose it and burn down their own house than run off like a sissy-pants to have a little cry in the corner. Lots of players would rather their characters get beat down, bruised, and fucked up than scared and run off. It can make the Flight Response a real downer, so part of handling it and making it cool (beyond mixing it with success as described above) is contextualizing it.

In a conversation or argument, it can mean losing control and retreating into defensive indignity or dogmatic repetition. Sometimes, it isn't about leaving the room or scene, but about fortressing up—retreat into a safe place. Lock the doors, lock the windows, turn off the lights, *be quiet*, and the bad people might go away.

It could mean spinning a web of lies and exaggerations to cover the fear, even if they'll come back and tangle you up later on. It could mean standing in the back of your own head, as your mouth flaps on its own, and the words coming out just get worse and worse, but they won't… stop. And when the horrors come through the walls, dripping with your dead parents blood, breath like an open sewer, then the safe warm blackness of unconsciousness envelopes you. No telling where you'll wake up from your swoon.

Even when it's a subtler reaction, remember to keep that *unreasoning* edge to it. Flight isn't about keeping your cool. It's about losing it, whether that's irrational "turtling", refusing help when you badly need it, or telling someone you love something hurtful just to push them away.

SNAP CRACKLE POP

REALLY losing your shit.

You just had to push it, didn't you? All that madness, all that horror, and you *kept doing it*. You could feel your mind fraying at the edges, unraveling like Weezer's sweater, but you still pushed it. Then you lost it, hurt people and broke things. Then you lost it, and ran 'til your heart tried to kick its way out of your chest. And then you wallowed in the insanity some more. No more Responses to check, and Madness dominates again—what happens when you snap?

Don't get that look on your face—"Oh, how did it come to this? Woe! Woe!"

You did it to yourself.

Now the question is: what does it mean?

First off, one of your Discipline dice just became a Permanent Madness die. That means *everything you do from now on* is touched by the Madness. Your Talent keeps creeping out, tainting your workaday reality with the miraculous and disturbing graces it brings. It means that any time you roll for anything, there's a chance Madness will dominate, even if you don't ask for any special mechanical punch.

This is also going to seriously sway the basic probabilities of the game system against you. If you pull three Madness or Exhaustion dice along side a healthy pool of three Discipline, then the odds are even-steven. If one of those dice does bad on you, then pulling in three extra dice pushes you into two to one territory. If you end up with two Permanent Madness dice, a pool of six dice put you at six to one against discipline. And all that before the GM throws out his pool of ten Pain, with a perverse gleam in his eye.

Second, and more immediately significant, you *snapped*. Bugnuts moonbats *outta yer fuckin' gourd*.

Now it's time to chew the goddamn scenery and *own* the scene. Consider the Questions, consider your Madness Talent—both literally and symbolically—and then dive in. This is Seventy-Two-Hour-Hold stuff. This is danger-to-himself-and-others stuff.

But unlike a nice, normal head case, your Madness is a real thing. It lives under your skin, between the pauses in sentences and heartbeats, the music of eyelids moving in sleep, the dreams that never are because they're trapped in dead brains. When you go crazy, it comes out to play and the world goes crazy, too.

NOTHING SUCCEEDS LIKE EXCESS (OPTIONAL RULE)

Here's an optional rule to consider. If you need to throw dice while snapped, you can add up to six Madness dice and laugh at the consequences—if Madness dominates now, all it does is extend the duration you're snapped (and the fallout that'll hit after the Thorazine and Lithium finally kick in). All your Responses are still checked off until this bout of Snapping is over.

Thing is, throwing around this much terrible crazy-power in your state of mind is going to wreck the place, but for good. It'll likely do some radical things to the shape of the game itself—this is Tetsuo screaming at Keneda and blowing up Neo Tokyo. You can barely direct it, let alone control it, and once unleashed it's going to keep going so long as you stay snapped. The GM gets a big say in how this unfolds, so you're at his tender mercy. And remember, he's the grinning bastard who kept hitting you with Pain 8 conflicts that drove you to this point!

MAN, WHAT DID I DO LAST NIGHT?

Saving a Snap for later

Pacing is vital in *Don't Rest Your Head*, and if playing out your shit-flipping in detail would derail things, slow things down, or just let you hog too much spotlight for the session, you or the GM might suggest saving the snap scene for later. Hard cut to the next morning—the sound of birds, sunshine beaming through the window, and under the table, groaning… you. "What the hell did I do last night?" you think, looking at the sucker-marks on your arms and the exquisitely-detailed tattoo of Tammy Faye Baker on your stomach. The snap scene can then be played when the pacing better allows it—a dream, a memory, a shuddering flashback triggered by the smell of the butcher's shop.

This setup can also set the stage for a mystery scenario—what the hell *did* you do? You can't remember, but perhaps you can find out. For a solo game, this could even make a great '*What Just Happened*' kind of session kicker. You wake up somewhere weird, in risky circumstances, with a die of Permanent Madness. Handling it this way lets you cloak the time before the snap in chaos as well—grab the newspaper and check the date, and then start sweating… what the hell did you do *for the last three days*?

IN SOVIET RUSSIA, THE MAD CITY LIVES IN YOU

Permanent Madness in Play

Having even one die of Permanent Madness means you can't keep the terrible power in its neat little box anymore. You can't turn it off. Ever. Your Madness Talent works all the time on some level, infecting your life with strangeness. It's unmistakable really—people get the creeps from you, that monkey sense that you're just not *right* anymore, as the madness perturbs the hundreds of unconscious signals humans exchange with each other, all the little limbic pings between mammal-brains. The madness means some of your signals are scrambled or disturbing. People who pay closer attention are going to get even more freaked out, because they might notice when your Talent bleeds through, and it'll make their brains flash and ding and go TILT! TILT! TILT!

Basically, it makes you weirder (which is an accomplishment for someone who hasn't slept in forty-three days), and makes it harder to relate to regular people. Possibly worse, it makes the Mad City start to feel *comfortable*. Dealing with daily reality gets confusing. More and more, it's getting harder to remember the reasons why people have jobs, girlfriends, pet cats, houses, cars, cappuccinos, samurai swords, and, well, *everything*. Before long, the only place whereyou'll feel at home is in the manifold streets and kinked space-time of the Mad City.

ONE OF THE GANG

Permanent Madness when Dealing with Nightmares

The first time a Nightmare stays its hand, withholding some horrible pain because it senses a kinship with you, your Permanent Madness might seem like a boon. But after a few more encounters, it gets pretty clear that a Nightmare liking you is as bad as a Nightmare hating you.

Permanent Madness means you're on the guest list—the ***Bouncer*** at the door of the *Billy Club* lifts the velvet rope and lets you in. The ***Flewzie*** with the camera snaps a picture of you—like you were a celebrity—and gets you to sign it. They hang it on the wall next to the one of Sammy Davis Junior standing next to Satan (who looks uncomfortable, but Sammy has him by the arm, and his glass eye has a reflection in it shaped like a skull).

But more than that, the Nightmares will start *expecting things* from you. They start treating you right, and then you don't want to come through for them and do you part? They're going to come looking for you. They know just where to find you,

too. They can smell the stink of the Mad City on you now, and there's no hiding from them. Some Nightmares see your refusal to come through and help out as betrayal, but the more cunning and dangerous ones pity you and the restrictive skin of humanity that you're trapped inside. They want to slit you open and let the Nightmare within emerge, and the best way to sever your humanity is to *sever* those who you're attached to. Here's an expression to practice saying: "I'm sorry baby, I'm so sorry. It's all my fault."

GOING NATIVE

Losing it all to the Madness.

If a drunk hits bottom, he can climb the twelve steps back up. But not you. When the Madness finally takes you, than that's it—you're done. Lose your last die of Discipline to Madness, and there's nothing to keep it in check anymore. In fact, there's nothing left of you at all. The creeping changes which warped you with the first and second die of Permanent Madness finally culminate in a final horrific transformation.

Sometimes, this final descent into oblivion happens immediately, and from your warping tissues the new nightmare springs fully formed, but if it serves the story better, this can happen slower, dragging out over a scene, or even a session.

For these long falls, keep in mind that your character is *doomed*. That's non-negotiable at this point. It might be less painful to just hand the GM your character sheet, fast, like ripping off a band-aid. But if you enjoy playing out the pathos, perhaps you'll achieve *something* before the end.

Your Madness is wholly unleashed at this point, and even if your human consciousness is fading, there might be enough of a spark left to direct that awful power to some final purpose. You always roll at least your three Permanent Madness dice, and can throw up to six more in addition to any Exhaustion you want to throw in. If Madness dominates, or Exhaustion does and it pushes you to Crash, then that's it—you're done. If not, then you manage to keep control for just a few crucial moments longer. So make that huge pile of dice count, before you inevitably succumb.

Make it memorable.

But… you recall that rule about how characters consumed by Madness become Nightmares with Pain ratings equal to the dice pool which finally threw them over the edge? Well, every subsequent roll you make during the long fall adds anther die to this total. You might do some good before succumbing, but when you finally do the monster that remains is way worse for it.

FINDING YOUR SHIT

Dealing with Madness and recovering Responses

Finding some way to cope with the stress of Madness, or a place of peace amidst the chaos—a little touch of beauty or common humanity—and you might find yourself restored and refreshed when you least expect it. But if checking Responses represents your drunken stumble closer and closer to the precipice, how do you take a breath and a step back?

Dominant Discipline lets you remove one Exhaustion or uncheck a Response, and when Pain hovers fairly low, you'll see more of these recoveries. But as Pain increases and must be met with larger and larger pools of Madness and Exhaustion, you'll see fewer of these reprieves. If you get Permanent Madness, fewer still.

And of course, Snapping and Crashing both clear your Responses, but this isn't a grand way to handle recovering them over the short term. The game's gears give you mad torque on the low end, but if you're looking to cruise it in fourth over a distance, then you might find you need a formalized way to refresh Responses in play.

So here and on the next few pages are some suggestions for handling recovery, coping, and preventative measures. Some break core assumptions about the pacing of a *Don't Rest Your Head* game, so consider yourself warned.

HOPE FOR AN ANSWER

Spend a Coin of Hope to remove a check from one Response as per "Getting a Break" in *Don't Rest Your Head*. This isn't all that interesting in itself, so it needs some good description. How does a little spark of hope restore you?

EXERT SOME WILLPOWER

When the sensible course of action suggests fighting or running away, do the opposite. This choice has to be suboptimal and lead to complications, but when running would be prudent, stand firm to recover a Flight Response. When kicking ass is advisable, then demurring, and seeking another solution refreshes a Fight response. You prove to yourself that you're in control, even to your detriment.

TIME CURES ALL WOUNDS

If the GM cuts between scenes and time passes between, it's reasonable to ask whether you recover some Responses. The GM should either tell you how many refresh or explain why they don't.

PHARMACOLOGICAL PHANTASMAGORIA

Drugs and Madness

Somewhere out there, in some underground beige-painted laboratory, agents of Big Pharma are injecting a psycho-perceptual stabilizing compound directly into an Awake prisoner's eyeballs—for the greater good, of course. More conventional pharmacological treatments for mental illness are going to be less effective against Permanent Madness or the stress represented by checked Responses. Best case, they'll suppress the grosser effects of a Madness Talent unleashed—doped into a drooling drug-zombie, there's not enough going on in your brain to gouge reality.

Or so you might hope. Psychotropic drugs (legal and non) are just as likely to unleash your Madness as restrain it—it's hard to keep a lid on things when you're will and discipline are warped with neurobiological chaos. Get really whacked out of your noodle, and you might have to grab Madness dice even if you don't want to. Awake brains are so messed up as it is, it's impossible to predict just what effect drugs'll have, if any at all.

PROFESSIONAL HELP

Getting "help" from Nightmares

There's the safe way to recover your sanity—stockpile precious Hope coins, and buy back your Discipline (which also means bargaining with other PCs looking to do the same thing). And then there's the other way—go looking for help from someone who really understand Madness. A Nightmare.

It's hard to imagine what kind of Nightmare would help you get your sanity back, but a few enjoy the challenge posed by the Awake seeking their lost Discipline. Of course, they're not really interested in healing you—they get you into their offices, and on their couch, and then put you through the grinder—cure or kill. They get a willing victim in exchange for the possibility of curing him.

So, what's the catch?

You've got to beat them *without Madness dominating.*

That'll be a bit of a challenge with your Permanent Madness in tow. But given the high Pain totals on their part (making it more likely to dominate), and some judicious (or is that *excessive*?) use of Exhaustion on your part, you might just have a shot.

HEADSHRINKER

He's big, he wears a cardigan, and his head is teeny and shrunken. He speaks in a high squeaky voice, and never stops talking. The Headshrinker keeps regular office hours, and his schedule is quite flexible. If you fail to show up for an appointment though, he'll send his ***Secreterrier*** to drag you in. His questions will make you question everything about yourself, and if you fall under his influence, your ego will be annihilated under his relentless analysis. If you survive a therapy session with him, regain a lost die of Discipline and one Response. (***Pain 8***)

GRIEF COUNCILOR

Call the Grief Hotline and talk to the ***Grief Councilor***. It's always a different cheery voice on the other end of the line. With casual references, it conjures old pain and opens emotional scars up to bleed again. Talking to the sunny Grief Councilor means confronting all your regrets and getting pounded to emotional hamburger by the recollections. You feel it all as if it just happened—everything from your doggy getting hit by a car when you were nine, to the sick, helpless inadequacy when your wife left you, to the 3 A.M. call about your Dad's stroke. If you can endure the Grief Councilor's helpful voice, you can recover a die of lost Discipline and two Responses. (***Pain 9***)

SEX THERAPIST

He, she, or it—the ***Sex Therapist*** is all things to all libidos. S/he'll fuck your brains out, then s/he'll mess with them. You'll lie there, emptied above and below, and s/he'll poke through your cerebellum and sniff your medulla oblongata. A touch on your wrinkly, grey matter fires cascades of memories—lust, sex, pain, pleasure, all deeply *physical* sensations. The flavor of your first bite of cake. The smell of a lover after a night together. The rain in your face. The tumbling chaos of laying down a motorcycle, and flopping rag-doll down the road.

What the Sex Therapist hits you with is the lie of body/mind duality. S/he shows you the flesh, the sensation of the flesh, and then the lump of flesh you use to think with, the flesh that fools itself into believing it is conscious. You are flesh, made of cells, and that's all. No soul. No mind. Just chemistry fucking physics. Survive this assault on your sense of self and you can recover two lost Discipline dice and all your Responses. (***Pain 12***)

RECOVERING YOUR SANITY... LITERALLY

Sanity as allegorical object, sought, contested, found

We said "Buy back your Discipline" in the previous section—what if you could do that literally? In the Bizarre Bazaar, you can buy *anything* right? Imagine your sanity as a physical thing, and then imagine it lost… somewhere. Finding the right dealer and haggling for a price you might possibly pay could get you lost Discipline dice back, but there's no way in hell this is going to make your life better.

Then there's doing some kind of devil's deal with something horrible. Some Nightmares (and other, weirder things) have the power to restore sanity in exchange for *unspecified* services. Until you pay up, they can take this Discipline back any time they like. Defy them, and they can drop you back into Madness. The nastier ones will wait until you pick up another die of Permanent Madness before they snatch back their power from you.

Or, less mercantile, you could do some kind of quest. This makes finding your lost sanity something more on the story level, leading to a psycho-surreal trial of the self, a testing in fire. Slay the dragon, kill the president, save the grand old tree… in the wilderness beyond the City, the strange lands you walk through are made from the stuff of dreams. Remember though—if you chop off the Green Knight's head to win back your sanity, he's coming back in a year to chop off yours.

BREAKING THE SURFACE

Recovery from Permanent Madness

Recovering from Permanent Madness means that you've stared into the abyss and come away scared, but basically whole. You no longer have the Permanent Madness dice, but there's still something in your eyes. Nightmares sense it—that you've beaten the Madness—and many of them are scared shitless by it. It might not affect what they try and do to you, but it gives you a little leverage on them, a cool bit of description and element of fear that other Awake don't have access too. It's a small thing, but it's there when you want it. Lock eyes with evil, and make it blink first.

I'm ok if You're ok

You're ok if I'm ok